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Moonstone Academy Boxed Set

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Moonstone Academy Year One

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Chapter 1

Bellanore

The moon glistens far above me, casting a silver halo on the darkness surrounding it. The stars hold no luster compared to the moon and her magnificence. The moon holds a special place in the hearts of all werewolves, and I'm no exception.

I feel a sense of peace wash over me, and I hold onto that feeling, treasuring it. My mom wants me to try to stop accepting my demonic side so much, but I have no choice. She has grown to hate her husband, my father, but I think that their love remains, even if she's too afraid to admit it. Just because my father is a demon doesn't mean that she should all of a sudden believe that he's incapable of love.

But just last month, they fought and fought hard. My dad doesn't understand why my mom insisted that I attend Moonstone Academy, but I know why. She wants me to be around werewolves my own age.

She also wishes to keep me from my dad.

Mom doesn't know that Dad and I made an agreement. Yes, we made the agreement behind her back, but I can't help it that she's a bit… inflexible. She would never agree to it, but the only way to get them to stop fighting was for me to agree to continue learning how to use my demonic powers on the weekends. I agreed willingly. I will not ignore a part of myself as my mom is. She's refusing to admit that she loves my dad just because he's a demon. How can she claim to love me, then, when I am half-werewolf, half-demon? I have not yet brought that point up to her, but I will if she fights with my dad again in front of me. For the most part, she tries to hide their fights from me as if I'm a child and not sixteen years old.

When exactly she started to turn against Dad, I'm not quite sure, but I do know that she's grown angrier with him whenever he teaches me something new. I don't understand what's wrong with learning and mastering every aspect of my identity, every aspect of my powers.

For three weeks, I've been at Moonstone Academy, and I have to say that I do enjoy it here. There are so many different packs that attend here, and I miss that. My mom doesn't bring me around to pack

meetings. Not since I decided when I was ten to take on my dad's name of Shade. My mom is in the Ember pack, and so, she is May Ember, but I am Bellanore Shade. I am almost not in a pack because of what my mom has done, so can she blame me for being with my dad? He accepts me for who I am completely and wholly, and all werewolves need a pack. There must be at least two. Lone wolves do not handle being without a pack for long. Rumors say that a lone wolf will eventually go mad, that he or she will turn into a wolf and never revert back to human. Some say that lone wolves will eventually die without any kind of explanation except that they have no pack to call their own.

Wolves need a pack to survive. It's within our blood, and who knows? A pack of a half-werewolf, half-demon and a demon might not be enough for me. Maybe I'll go insane.

Would my mom mourn me? Will she realize that she may have played a role? Or would she use that as a weapon against my dad to push him away even more?

"Someone looks like she is thinking far too hard for this magnificent night," a clear voice wrings out.

I glance over my shoulder to see my best friend approaching. Ellamaria is a part of the Ember pack, like my mom, and she has embraced me wholly and completely, unlike my mom. We've been friends since we were born. Our birthdays are a day apart. I'm a day older, but if you go by minutes, I'm only twenty-six minutes older. She was born at the stroke of midnight, the perfect time for a werewolf to be born. I used to tease her that it would give her special powers, but she didn't appreciate that, so I stopped.

"I'm special just because I'm me," she would retort, and honestly, I can't argue with that. She's strong and fierce, sharp as a wit. She's also muscular, like most werewolves, slender but able to bench press her own weight.

"Well?" Ellamaria demands. "What are you thinking about?"

"How beautiful the moon is."

"Don't lie to me," Ellamaria says with a pout. "You were thinking about your parents again, weren't you?"

I narrow my eyes. I'm the one who can sniff out if someone is lying. It's a trait that not all demons have. No werewolves can as far as I know. She just knows me that well to be able to tell.

With a shrug, I heave a sigh. "Maybe."

"No maybe. Did your mom call?"

"No. She called my first week here to make sure I was all settled in, and she hasn't called me since."

"I'm sorry. Do you think you should call her?"

"No. Why should I? If she wanted to talk, we would talk."

Ellamaria falls into step beside me. I'm just strolling along the campus, heading toward the center but not really having a true destination in mind. I love to go on long walks, to connect with nature, to be able to see the world for what it is. The walks give me a chance to just be me without any expectations from others. Demons might be dark creatures of the underworld, but I'm also a werewolf, and werewolves are about nature almost as much as fairies are.

"You're mad at her," Ellamaria murmurs. "Madder than a hornet trapped in a beehive."

I glance at her, and she grins. "Why would a hornet be mad about being in a beehive?"

"Trapped, remember? Your mom makes you feel trapped."

I blow out a breath through my nose. "How is it that my dad is the one who makes me feel more free?"

"I think your mom just needs to… I don't know. Maybe she needs to shift into her wolf. When did she last?"

After crossing my arms, I rub them and then shrug. "I don't know. She hasn't asked me to shift with her in years."

"And your house is in a city of humans. Why? Why doesn't she live in Emberpeak with the rest of the Ember pack?"

"She's a lawyer for the humans. She enjoys it, finds it fulfilling." I bite my lower lip. "You know that humans can find lawyers to be bloodsuckers, right?"

Ellamaria snorts. "Maybe that's why she fell for your dad in the first place."

I link our arms. "Will you do me a favor?" I ask.

"I know better than to say anything without knowing the favor first," she says slowly.

I beam and stifle a laugh. When we were pups, I asked her for a favor once. She agreed, and the favor turned out for her to get a mouse and put it in with Troy's toys. As it turns out, Ellamaria hates mice. She did do the favor, though, and she took it a step further. She put a *dead* mouse with the toys.

When Troy found out, he actually loved it and thought it was great fun to throw it up and down and catch it in his mouth, as a wolf pup, of course, not as a human boy. As for why I wanted to have Ellamaria's help with the prank against Troy, well, I played more than a few pranks back then, and I was afraid I would get in trouble. As for why Troy? Well, he liked to prank me back.

The pranks all came to an end after Troy set off a firecracker that almost set the entire mountain on fire. Whoops.

"What's the favor?" Ellamaria asks.

"Can you keep an eye on Mom when she comes around to the pack? She does come around to the pack, right?"

“Of course,” she says warmly, “and she does come around. I’m sorry she’s not being the best of moms to you.”

“She never would win Mother of the Year, but who would’ve ever thought that my demon dad would be the better parent?”

“You shouldn’t judge them,” Ellamaria says, her scowl dark. Her skin is tan all year round, but we’re passing under a tree, so her face looks darker than normal. “You shouldn’t have a favorite.”

“You still feel like your mom favors Donovan?”

“No, Roger.” Her scowl grows. “Christine has always been my dad’s favorite. He doesn’t even try to hide it. I’m on the outside with Darla. It’s not fun, not at all.”

“I don’t have a favorite parent,” I protest.

Ellamaria just stares at me and slowly lifts one eyebrow.

“I don’t!”

“You do realize that you sound like a child, don’t you?”

“I do not.”

She laughs, and I join in.

“I can’t help it. The way my mom treats me…” I slump my shoulders.

“Hey.” Ellamaria knocks her shoulder into mine and lifts her chin. “Look over there.”

“Where?”

“To the right but don’t—”

I turn my head to the right and just make out a few werewolves.

“—be obvious.” Ellamaria slaps her forehead.

“What?” I ask, not sure why she’s pointing them out.

“What do you think about the middle one?”

To appease Ellamaria, I look more discreetly this time. The werewolf has shaggy brown hair falling across his forehead and into his eyes.

“What about him?”

“What do you think?”

“As far as…”

“You do know who that is, don’t you?”

“No. Should I?”

“I thought for sure… That’s Julian Moonblaze.”

“Oh.”

“He checks you out all the time. Why don’t you hang out with him? Get to know him? He seems nice from what I know, and maybe if you have a boyfriend, your mom will get off your back.”

“You mean if I have a werewolf boyfriend,” I say bitterly.

“You won’t even consider Julian?”

“I don’t know him.”

“So get to know him!”

“Ellamaria, I don’t need a boyfriend.”

“I never said that you need one,” she counters. “I’m just saying that there’s a nice guy who seems interested in you. Why not be friends with him at the very least? You don’t talk too much to anyone outside of me.”

She has a point. Troy and the rest of the teens in the Ember pack and I don’t talk much. I think it might be because my mom might’ve said something, but I don’t know, and I don’t want to ask Ellamaria because she’s my friend and not a spy. Besides, if they can’t see me for who I am and let my actions speak for me versus my blood, then that’s on them. Their loss.

I shrug.

Ellamaria sighs. “You aren’t going to talk to him, are you?”

“Probably not. Besides…” I glance their way again. “How do you know he’s not with her?”

“Mercy Lance? No way. The three of them are all good friends, Mercy, Julian, and Bermon.”

“Bermon…”

“Bermon Von Hagen. I think he and Julian are cousins. They’re all close, but you’re the one who has caught Julian’s eye.”

“Not interested.”

“But, why?”

“Hmm. I don’t know. Maybe because we don’t know each other? So if he’s interested like you said, then it’s because of my looks. Sorry. I just don’t want to be with someone who judges people based on something so superficial.”

Ellamaria heaves a dramatic sigh. "I guess you aren't as immature as I thought, considering you want someone who actually knows you. Here's a thought. Maybe the ones who do know you don't want to be with you because of who you are."

“Geez, thanks.”

“Don’t worry. Maybe we’ll both become spinsters.”

“Spinsters? You do know that you’re only considered a spinster from the ages of eighteen to twenty-five?” I ask.

Ellamaria blinks a few times. “You and the random bits of knowledge you acquire from your demonic father.”

I shrug. “Do you want to know the term for twenty-six to thirty-five?”

“Why not? You’re just going to tell me anyhow.”

“Thornback.”

“Thornback?” she all but shrieks, barely containing her mirth.

"But wait! Thirty-six to forty-five is a doomwitch!"

“No!” She giggles.

“But the next one is even better.”

“Not possible.”

“Yeah, huh.” I laugh. “Hengequeen!”

We both laugh before Ellamaria pulls me close for a one-armed hug. “The point is that we can grow old together, best friends for life.”

“Fighting all the time,” I tease.

“Only if you try to pass off chocolate chip cookies as oatmeal raisins again.”

“You’re the only person in the world to not like chocolate,” I protest.

“That doesn’t mean you have to torment me with it.”

“You’re the torment,” I tease.

“You really do want to fight all the time, don’t you?” Ellamaria brushes back her dark brown hair and sighs. “Well, don’t say I didn’t try to make you happy.”

“A guy won’t—”

“That’s all I want,” she continues. “For you to be happy. I know that you’re at a bit of a crossroads. I, for one, think you should take the road least traveled.”

“So I can get lost?”

“So you can continue to find yourself.”

I grin. “With you by my side, I don’t think I have a choice. You won’t let me be someone I’m not.”

“Good. And if your mom won’t be a real mom to you, maybe we can see about my mom acting as yours. I mean, she has enough pups to tend to as it is. Why not one more?”

“Somehow, I think that might cause a lot more issues for me.”

“You need a mom.”

“Plenty of kids grow up without a mom. Some even are orphans. I can manage with an absent mom.”

“You shouldn’t have to,” she grumbles.

“Life isn’t always fair.”

“No, but you can and should be able to be happy.”

“I *am* happy,” I murmur.

She narrows her eyes at me, critically appraising me, and then she nods. “Fine. I believe you. Now, let’s head back to our room and watch a scary movie and eat caramel popcorn.”

“It’s not October yet,” I protest.

“So? We’re werewolves. We’re like the embodiment of Halloween. Halloween all year round, baby!”

“But you don’t even like chocolate!”

“So? Halloween isn’t just about candy. It’s a lifestyle.”

“You’re a freak, you know that?”

“That’s why you love me.”

We both giggle, and any lingering melancholy over my mom

disappears. Things will get better, or they won't, but for now, I really am happy.

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Chapter 2

Bellanore

Too bad that happiness doesn't last long.

Ellamaria and I don't have any morning classes the same, and they aren't even in the same general vicinity on campus, so we can't even walk together. I'm heading northward when someone falls into step beside me.

I glance over to see Wyatt there. Jett comes up on Wyatt's other side, and then Gayle and Mindy come up on my right side. All four of them are in Spark pack. It's an offshoot of the Ember pack. I think an alpha had twins at one point, and instead of one submitting himself to the other, they split into two. One stayed as Ember's new alpha once their father passed away, and the other started Spark.

Since none of the quartet say anything, I don't either, but it's only a matter of time.

Only seconds as it turns out.

Wyatt moves ahead and turns around, forcing me to stop because he's blocking my path. "What's with your hair?" he asks, touching some of my long strands.

"What's with yours?" I ask with a smirk. "I didn't think werewolves could have receding hairlines, especially so young."

Wyatt bares his teeth at me, but I just smile at him.

"I think hair comes from your mother's father. Was your mom's father bald?" I ask.

"You're barking up the wrong tree," Wyatt growls.

"Her bark isn't that bad, and her bite's even more pathetic," Gayle says, sticking her nose in the air.

"Is that so?" I ask coolly. "I wasn't aware."

Wyatt goes to yank on my hair, but I flick my neck to pull it free. Yes, I have unusual hair coloring. For the most part, I have black hair, but I do have some strands that are white.

"You look like a freak," he hisses. "That because of your dad?"

"I can't stand when she looks at me," Mindy pipes up. "Her eyes are so freaky."

Okay, now that's just being mean.

I purposely turn to look at Mindy, who lets out an "eep!" and crosses over to grab Jett's arm.

I roll my eyes. So they're green? So they glow? Who cares?

"I don't care what you all think of me," I say firmly. "Now, if you'll excuse me…"

I try to walk around them, but Wyatt again moves to block me.

"You didn't answer my question," he growls.

"I'm sorry. I don't have to talk to you."

"No?" He reaches toward me.

I stare at his hand as if it's a venomous snake. "Are you sure you want to touch me?" I ask dryly.

"Why do you look like a freak?" he asks.

"Why do you have a tendency to ask questions that you know aren't nice?" I return. "Why don't you ask something more civilized? What's your favorite color, Bellanore? What's your favorite drink?"

"I bet it's blood," Mindy whispers to Gayle. They giggle.

"Color has to be red, blood red," Jett says. "Or maybe black like her soul."

"What do you guys take me for? I'm not a vampire." I roll my eyes.

"No, but you have a demon for a father." Wyatt grabs my gray cardigan. I'm wearing Moonstone Academy's uniform—the gray cardigan with a buttoned-down white shirt underneath that has the top two buttons undone, and a green and blue plaid skirt with some yellow and red lines in it and a matching tie that's loose around my neck. Black knee-high socks and black boots complete the uniform.

The guys wear the same except pants instead of the skirt and instead of a cardigan, they wear a sports coat.

Since he grabs my cardigan, I grab his tie. "You want to play games with me?" I ask sharply. "You shouldn't because you won't win."

"That so, demon girl?" He brings his face closer to mine.

I lean back. There's no crowd around us. In fact, the campus is almost empty. Most everyone is in their classes already, which is where I want to be.

"I don't want you to call me that ever again," I say slowly, clearly, enunciating each word.

Wyatt laughs. "Do you hear her? She thinks she can tell me what to do."

The other three all laugh.

"I don't know how you learned about who my dad is, but I don't care."

"You think you can threaten us with your demon dad, do you?" Wyatt's face twists into an angry sneer.

“I don’t make threats,” I say idly. “I make promises, and I promise you that if you don’t let go of my cardigan, you will regret it.”

“Oh, yeah? How so?”

His tie is like mine, not tight against his throat, but that's all right. I wrap it around my hand once, grab it tight, and then basically tap the back of my hand against his Adam's apple hard.

Wyatt tries to stagger back a step, but I still have a hold on his tie, so he can’t. He’s gasping for air as I release his tie and hold onto his shoulders.

“Are you going to leave me be and never call me that again, or do I need to give you another lesson? And this lesson will be…”

I draw up a knee.

Wyatt shrugs me off him and glowers at me. “Why don’t you want me to call you that? You’re a girl, and you’re a demon. Demon girl.”

“You’re so very original,” I say. I turn my gaze toward the others. “Don’t touch me. Don’t talk to me, and don’t talk about me either.” I give them all a bright, warm grin. “I have ways of knowing if my name is evoked.”

“Is that… Is that a demon thing?” Gayle asks.

“I don’t know.” Mindy clings to Jett tighter.

I give them all a big old smile, wave, and stalk on by. This time, Wyatt doesn’t move to stop me.

As much as I want to run to class so I won’t be late, I also don’t want to give them the satisfaction that I’m running away from them, so I walk the rest of the way to class. The professor isn’t pleased and assigns me extra work because of my tardiness, and when he catches me “daydreaming,” he gives me even more.

I’m not daydreaming. It’s clear to me that someone from Ember pack told Spark pack that my dad is a demon. Who would do that, and why? Wyatt and his group have never been nice to me before, but I wouldn’t call them out and out bullies until today. They must’ve just learned, maybe even last night.

Had they overheard my conversation with Ellamaria? I think I did mention demon dad. Maybe there’s no one to blame but myself. Werewolves have heightened senses over humans, but our senses are most powerful when we’re in our wolf forms. I try to block out the rest of the world when I’m having a conversation with someone. I like to focus on them and only them. For one thing, it helps when I’m trying to determine if they’re telling me the truth or not. For another, it’s called respect, which is something Wyatt and the others clearly lack.

Dad has been getting on me to stop being so one-tracked. He wants me to always be aware of my surroundings. I doubt he ever thought that someone would dare to bully the daughter of a demon when he

finally agreed for me to attend here, but he should be pleased that I stuck up for myself.

Still, I'm not certain that they'll stop, and I wouldn't put it past Wyatt to tell others and spread the word all over campus that my dad is a demon. What would be worse is if word gets out that my mom has practically disowned me. I have my guess as to why we live in a human city. Mom might've had some flak for dating, loving, and marrying a demon. Now, it seems that she's regretting her decision.

She wouldn't have let slip to another pack, would she? No. She wouldn't want me to be given grief here. She wants me here because she wants me to do what she does and ignore the demon part of her life.

My stomach churns. Demons can love. I know they can because Dad loves me. He's proven that time and again. Demons can also make vows, but they aren't always going to follow through on them. They tend to do what's necessary for survival, and if that means crossing a line or breaking a vow, they will.

But what if Mom wants to push Dad to that point? What if she wants him to do something unforgivable so she can be free of him? So she can say, "See? I never should've married you!"

But if they hadn't married, I wouldn't have been born. Mom only agreed to try for a child if they were married. She didn't want to have to raise me by herself.

So if she wishes she never married Dad, then she wishes I was never born.

It's not my demon dad who has hate in his heart. It's my mom.

And Wyatt and the others share that same hate.

They can go ahead and hate me. I don't care. I know who and what I am, and I'm not going to make excuses or apologies. What you see is what you get, and I'm more than a little bit okay with that.

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Chapter 3

Robb

The werewolf stares at me with a dull look in her eyes. “Name?” she asks even though I already told it to her.

“Robb Aline.”

“Robb Aline,” she murmurs as she types into her computer. “Oh, yes. Here you are. It says you’re being… It doesn’t list which school you’re transferring from.”

“I was homeschooled.”

“Interesting. And why have you decided to attend Moonstone Academy?”

I cross my arms and tilted my head to the side. “I didn’t think questioning why students are attending your academy would be good form, considering you don’t want them to start questioning it themselves, do you?”

She flushes slightly. “No, of course not. It’s just that werewolves tend to be in packs and live together and work together and go to school together… We have so many different packs that attend here, but no other Aline.”

“No?” I gasp. “Is that so? I had no idea that that was how werewolves tend to be.” I drum my fingers on her desk. “But if that’s how they tend to be, that does suggest some outliers, doesn’t it?”

She wrinkles her nose at me as if she smelled something horrible. “Yes, I suppose it does.” Her gaze zeroes in on the scar over my left eye.

My nostrils flare. If she asks me about it…

“I hope you won’t have any trouble fitting in, Robb,” she says as she prints out my schedule. She collects it but doesn’t hand it over. “You might want to curb the sarcasm a bit with your professors.”

“I’ll keep that in mind if I can see which professors I need to curb my sarcasm from,” I say pointedly.

With pursed lips, she hands me the schedule. “Have a good day,” she mutters, but I can tell she doesn’t mean it, and I rightly don’t care.

I won’t be having a good day. I already know that.

My gaze surveys the scene as I stroll away from the office building. Lots of green land, a ton of paths, some pawprints in the grass. It seems that werewolves might be allowed to roam about the lands here as their wolves. Interesting.

Once I'm far enough away that the secretary can stop shooting daggers into my backside, I halt and examine my schedule. My first class is wallcrawling, so it's not as if it's even that important. I mean, seriously. We're all werewolves. We can turn our fingers into claws, so climbing walls isn't all that difficult at all for us. We can do what we want on any surface, pretty much.

But I'm not exactly sure which way to go, and I end up being late. There's no one around for me to ask where to go. Yes, I would've asked for directions. I didn't bother with that secretary, though, because I'm not entirely certain that she would've told me the correct way to go. She wasn't exactly the most pleasant of persons. I know I gave her a little attitude, but that was because of how she treated me. My scar doesn't make me a leper.

When I finally enter the classroom, the professor stops talking midsentence and glowers at me. "Whoever you are, if you're a student for this class, you're late."

"Forgive me. I'm a new transfer."

"Name?" the professor grunts.

"Robb."

"Have a pack, Robb?" he snaps.

"Aline."

The professor grunts again. "You dishonor your pack by ignoring it. You should never just give your first name. Your pack name is what's most important."

"Yes, sir."

"That's Professor Rockhound to you, Aline!"

"Yes, Professor Rockhound," I mutter. "May I have a seat?"

"No!" The professor curls back his upper lip. "This is wallcrawling class. You can spend the rest of the class crawling along the wall."

"Not a problem." I hold up my hand and start to turn my fingers into claws.

"No claws," Professor Rockhound says with a devilish grimace.

"Still not a problem," I say smugly.

The class is in a stone castle room, and the stones provide more than enough hand- and foot-holds for me to be able to climb and crawl around the room for the duration of the class. Unfortunately, this school has a few classes each year, so the class times are incredibly long. I'm strong, even for a werewolf, but even my arms are dying by the time the class is finally over.

Professor Rockhound barely hides his contempt for me as I stroll

out of there. An enemy for my first teacher. Great. Who knew that calling him sir would set him off even more? Here I thought I was being respectful. I can't win for losing. I would call it a day and cut my losses, but it's the first day, and I really should be doing a better job of trying to fit in. Because of having to wallcrawl the entire class after being late to class in the first place, I haven't been able to talk to any of the students yet.

Not that I want to, if I'm being honest. I would rather just keep my head down low, go about my business, and then return to my room, but that's not the case. I have lunch now and then two classes.

The school year is a month in, but it seems like all of the tiny cliques have already formed, and hardly anyone looks my way. Honestly, that doesn't bother me too much. After all, I hate it when people stare at my scar. It's over my left eye, and it's no one's—repeat, no one's—business how I got it.

I run a hand through my black hair and glance around. One girl looks at me. Her eyes widen, and she looks away before glancing at another girl with black hair and a few white strands.

Rolling my eyes, I stalk away. The scent of food should arouse my appetite, but I'm not all the hungry. Deep down, I don't feel much of anything. Not hunger, not pain, nothing at all.

It's not fun, actually, not feeling anything. It's a bother, a chore, a fight to live. When you don't have joy or excitement or anything at all like that, there's no drive, no purpose. Your life is aimless, meaningless, purposeless.

I'm here, but I'm not fully me, if that makes sense.

I wasn't always like this, but right about when I got my scar is when I started to feel this way, and it just might be the only feeling I'll ever experience ever again.

To say that the day hasn't gotten off to a good start is an understatement, and I'm considering heading back to my room to have a few moments alone before my next class when someone plows right into me.

"Watch where you're going," I snap.

"Excuse me," the werewolf says, her glowing green eyes flashing. She's the one I spied earlier, the one with black hair with some white. "I was trying to see if you need any help when…"

She looks away to throw a glower that would make most men wince at another werewolf who just waves to her. His cronies all laugh.

"He tripped you into me?" I ask.

She says nothing.

"Well, you're clearly a wolf and not a cat," I mumble.

She stiffens. "And just what is that supposed to mean?" she

demands, crossing her arms.

"Cats have good balance and always land on their feet." I lift my chin.

"I didn't fall down," she snaps. "My balance is just fine."

"Oh, so if I shove you, you won't fall down?"

"Is your first instinct really toward violence?"

"You and I and everyone here has a wolf inside of us. We're violent by nature."

"Wolves aren't always violent every second of the day. They can be peaceful creatures."

"Can be. They don't have to be, and when they're riled up…"

"Look, I get that you aren't having a good day."

I furrow my brow. "What are you talking about?"

"Wallcrawling class. I heard that Professor…" She trails off.

"So you're a gossip, are you?"

"Look, buddy, I came over here to see if you wanted to have help learning where the line is for food or to even offer to get you food. I don't appreciate you acting as if I came over here for nefarious reasons."

"You didn't come over here to learn the inside scoop on me?"

"That you're nothing more than one of the werewolves to give the rest of us a bad name? I'm sure it won't take the rest of the school long at all to realize that."

My eyes narrow as her gaze settles on my eyes. I've never seen another werewolf who has eyes that glow. Mine do too, but while hers are green, mine are sky blue.

But she's not looking at my eyes. She's looking at my scar. I can tell because she's wincing and from the way she's biting her lower lip.

"Trying to keep back a question about my scar, are you?" I spit out. "Why don't you go and take your 'helpful' self and find someone who actually wants you to meddle in their affairs?"

"Why don't you just transfer back to whichever school you came from? Moonstone Academy already has more than its quota of ignorant, insufferable jerks."

"Wow, you really know how to make a guy feel all nice and fuzzy, don't you?" I ask. "Don't worry. I'm not here to find myself a girlfriend. I'm here for another reason altogether."

"If you think you have it over Professor Rockhound just because you were able to crawl around the wall of that room for the entire class, you're wrong. Just you wait. If you don't get on his good side, he'll make you climb Rock's Edge."

I don't want to rise to her bait, so I refuse to ask what that is.

"I don't care what he asks me to climb, sweetheart. I can climb it," I say. "I can climb sheet metal."

“With claws?” She rolls her eyes, clearly unimpressed.

“With or without.”

“Yeah, sure. Talk is cheap.”

“You want to know what’s cheaper?” I counter.

“The breath I’m wasting talking to you.” She brushes her hair over her shoulder, and she stomps away.

The guy and his friends who hassled her hoot and holler and try to get me to come over, but I ignore them. I’m not ready to be in the spotlight here. I’m never going to be, but this scar…

Werewolves heal. At least, they do under normal circumstances, but the way I got this scar had been anything but normal. It’s bound to attract attention, and it’ll never heal. I’ll bear this scar until I die, and honestly, I’m not sure when I will die. With the way I feel nothing at all, I’m willing to bet that my death will be coming sooner rather than later.

Wolves are meant to feel, to connect to one another. Your pack is your life. Professor Rockhound isn’t wrong about that. The only thing that matters is the pack. You’re supposed to feel what each other feels, supposed to help those who are hurting.

I’m the only Aline here, and that’s fine. I’ll survive for as long as I can.

That’s all anyone can expect from me.

That’s all I expect from me.

For whatever that’s worth.

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Chapter 4

Robb

I start to head back toward the tiny castle where I live with who knows how many other students when a group of four werewolves start to head my way. I grit my teeth, ready for a rumble, but as they clearly come toward me, they stop to shout and beat up and bully a few of the others.

Clearly, they think they're some kind of tough crowd or something, but I'm not impressed. Not at all. They can pretend that beating others up makes them tough, but that's not the case. If you want to be tough, just be tough. It's as simple as that.

The ringleader is tall, maybe six feet, but that means I still have four inches on him. I eye him, and he stares back at me.

"You seem to know how to carry yourself," he says, lifting his chin.

"You care why?" I ask, cutting right to the chase.

He laughs, and when he glances at his friends, they all laugh too. Pathetic.

"You were able to hang with Professor Rockhound from what we hear."

"So I'm not the only one to face that particular brand of punishment from him, huh?" I ask.

"No, you aren't special," the leader spits out, his gray eyes turning dark, almost as dark as his black hair, "but maybe you can be. You're the only Aline here, aren't you?"

"What's it to you?"

He juts his thumb toward his chest. "I'm Jagger. Roald Jagger." He pauses like that should mean something to me.

It doesn't.

"I'm the only Jagger here," he growls. He points to a guy with brown hair and eyes. "That there is Decker Winds. Only Winds here."

It seems Roald is determined for me to learn all of their names, and I cross my arms and wait for him to finish.

"I'm Elliot Snowblood," pipes up the blond-haired, brown-eyed werewolf.

“Let me guess?” I ask dryly. “You’re the only… No.” I narrow my eyes. “You aren’t the only Snowblood here.”

Elliot blinked a few times. “I’m not the only one,” he admits. “How…”

“And you?” I direct my question to the only female in the group.

“Nia Forge.”

When she nods, her short brown hair falls forward, some strands sticking to the corner of her tight mouth. Her eyes are a cold blue, and if anyone should be the leader of the group, I think it should be her because there’s a haunting deadness in her eyes that Roald lacks. The others aren’t as rough as they like to think they are, as they pretend to be, but Nia? She’s the real deal. She’s either seen something or experienced it. Maybe her scar isn’t visible like mine, but I’m willing to bet she has at least one.

“Only one?” I ask her, wondering if she feels the same nothingness I do.

She nods again.

“As you can see, we don’t all have solid packs,” Roald says. He lifts his chin, looking every bit as happy as a peacock. “We’re trying to form our own.”

I close my eyes a moment, so I won't roll them. "That so?"

“Yes.”

It’s not as easy as he’s making it out to be. They might be the only ones of their packs here, but I doubt they’re all orphans, which means their parents are alive. For the most part, werewolves tend to date werewolves, although a few do date and even marry humans. They’ll have to leave every month or so to hide transforming into a wolf. You have to. Our bodies, our natures… We have no choice. We can’t abandon our wolf, or else we risk abandoning our sanity.

And because of their parents, that means they aren’t in a pack of one. That also means it’s not so simple to make a new pack for the lot of them to join. For that, they would need a true alpha, and that’s not Roald, as much as I’m sure he thinks it does. It’s probably not Nia either. An alpha needs to feel emotions, to have empathy and strength and compassion or ruthlessness when necessary.

“Can you guess who the alpha would be?” Roald asks.

I shake my head. “I just met the lot of you. I can’t possibly know.”

Roald’s nostrils flare. “You can’t make a guess?” he demands, his voice growing tight, harsh.

“I can if you twist my arm behind my back, but unless you do that, I don’t feel the need to.” I shrug.

Roald glowers at me, and I swear Decker and Elliot step closer to me as if they’re going to grab me so my arm can be twisted, just like I said.

“Can it, Roald,” Nia snaps. “We all know you want to be head honcho, but that’s not in the stars for you.”

“You and the stars,” Roald bites back. “You act as if the stars can tell the future.”

“You know that’s true!”

“You aren’t a fairy! You can’t read the stars!”

“Fairies aren’t the only ones who can!”

“Doesn’t matter. You can’t!”

"Yet, you don't want me to see what the stars have seen for you." Nia gives a cold, chilling smile. "Are you so sure I haven't?"

“You wouldn’t dare,” Roald says, his words almost growls.

Nia laughs, but the sound is without mirth. She really is chilling. "If you don't think I can, then why are you so nervous? You think that just because we're all here that we're going to be willing to listen to you, let you decide what we do? That's not how it works, Roald. We're here because we want to be, but it's not because of your say so."

“You want to be here because I can lead—”

“You can’t lead,” Decker cuts in.

“Why not?” Roald roars, rounding on the blond.

“You aren’t…”

“I’m not what?”

I lean back slightly, arms still crossed. This was somewhat amusing at first, but it’s starting to grow wearisome. I don’t care much at all about their bickering, and I don’t think I want any part of this supposedly rough crowd of loners. They can’t even be true lone wolves. They have to be together, and no, that doesn’t make them a pack. It makes them a mockery of what they claim to be.

“You aren’t alpha material,” Elliot speaks up.

“And how would you know?” Roald snaps. “You want to leave your alpha, or isn’t that what you said?”

Elliot flares his nostrils and inhales deeply. “I…”

“Leave him be,” I say mildly.

Roald’s gray eyes flash. The werewolf has a lot of emotion in him, too much emotion if you ask me. The amount of anger he has inside of him makes me wonder if he might be able to make it as an alpha after all. A terrible alpha at that, but an alpha nonetheless.

An alpha isn’t just something related to blood. It’s something much deeper and stronger than that. Not all alphas are good ones, but the ones that are the strongest are the ones who truly care about their people and will do anything for their pack.

It’s clear to me that none of the ones here are capable of being a good alpha. They’re all too self-serving, too ambitious, too egotistical. They aren’t even friends. How can they even contemplate being together in a pack? The idea is ludicrous.

“Who are you telling to leave be?” Roald asks me.

"Maybe I'm telling all of you," I challenge, "and by leave him be, I mean me. I'm not here to listen to you all squabble about who should be alpha. Who cares? There's no pack to be had here."

“You don’t even know us,” Roald snaps.

“And I don’t want that to change,” I return.

Roald then does the craziest thing.

He doesn’t take a swing at me.

He doesn’t kick me, grab me, or anything like that.

No, he throws back his head, and he roars with laughter.

“I knew I liked you!” Roald says. “You’ve got something about you that I really appreciate.”

“What’s that?”

“You speak your mind. Not many people are willing to do that to me.”

“I do it all the time, but you don’t listen to me,” Nia says in a tone that makes a shiver go down my spine. If I have to guess, she’s not going to tolerate that from Roald much longer. She wants respect, and she’s going to get it even if she has to carve it from your carcass.

I’m never going to talk to her if I can help it.

As if to prove her point, Roald ignores her and goes to drape his arm over my shoulders, but I stiffly move out of the way. Undeterred, Roald declares, “You can be one of us if you want. I suggest you accept our generous offer. There are some students here who don’t like newcomers. We can protect you.”

“I’m sure I don’t need protection,” I say dryly.

Roald grimaces.

Decker snorts. “He’s got a point. No one’s going to mess with him.”

“How’s the other guy lookin’?” Elliot asks, jutting his chin up toward my eyes.

I bare my teeth, unamused. “A lot worse than this.”

The guys all hoot and holler at that, but I’m still feeling antsy and anxious to get rid of them. I don’t care for their big talk or their negative energy. I don’t feel much, but that they’re radiating this much is saying something, and it’s not saying anything good.

“What do you want to do?” Decker asks. “I was thinking about skipping class. My wolf wants out.”

“You let your wolf out too much,” Elliot says. “You’re liable to never turn back.”

“Whatever. You’re just jealous that the last time we went hunting, I stole that rabbit kill out from under your nose.”

“You’re just lucky the rabbit didn’t have worms,” Elliot hisses.

“Boys, boys,” Nia admonishes. “We all know you both have fleas.”

Elliot had been caught scratching his head right as she said that.

He stops and scowls at her. “I don’t have fleas!”

She just smirks.

I slide a step away from Elliot and Decker.

Nia’s smirk only grows.

Roald claps his hands. “I’m sure Robb here doesn’t want to be late to all of his classes today. We should let him get to it.”

“How generous of you,” I say dryly.

“What do you have next?” Roald asks.

“Compass sense and then predator instinct.”

“Of course.” Roald grimaces. “I have predator instinct next, not last.”

“It seems like a waste of a class,” I remark.

“I bet you think the same of wallcrawling,” Nia says.

“Maybe.”

“All of the classes are worthwhile. Don’t listen to them. They disagree because they don’t bother to pay attention, but I do. I know what’s what.”

“And what’s that?” I ask as the guys complain in the background about her assessment.

“That there’s always more to learn.”

“As far as…”

“As far as ways to better your chances of survival.” She purses her lips. “You obviously know that only werewolves attend Moonstone Academy, right?”

“Yes.”

“Has anyone told you about our rival?”

I shake my head. I didn’t want to engage in a long talk with her, but right now, I’m a bit curious, and also, I don’t want to get on her bad side. So far, just about everyone I’ve talked to today, I’ve fought with, managed to pick a fight with, and I’m hoping the rest of the day will go a bit smoother.

“Blood Haven Academy,” Roald cuts in. “Any guess what attends there?”

“Bloodsuckers,” Decker cuts in.

“Vampires,” Elliot adds unnecessarily.

“Isn’t that just peaches and cream?” I mutter.

"You ever see a vampire up close before?" Roald asks me.

“Yes,” I say evenly.

They all, even Nia, try to pry more out of me about that, but I just depart and head off to my next class. I never did eat a single bite, but that’s the thing. Like I said, I don’t feel anything at all anymore, and that includes hunger. I’m never hungry, and I only eat at most two meals a day. I don’t drink much either, but I don’t drink blood. I’m not a vampire. I’m just a werewolf.

A cursed werewolf.

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Chapter 5

Bellanore

The moon is glorious and splendid, a regal red in color this night, and I stare out my window at it, appreciating the sight when my phone rings in the dark, thundering tones of the opera song my dad picked out as his ringtone.

“Hello, Dad. What do you need?”

“Is that any way to address your dad?” he asks.

“I asked for one weekend off, just one, only this one, and you still called me, and I have a feeling it’s because you decided to change your mind.”

“Have I been known to do that?”

"To change your mind to suit your will? Hmm, let me think." I tap a finger to my cheek even though he can't see me. "Yes, yes, you have. Many times, in fact."

Dad roars with laughter. “Yes, how perfectly demonic of me.”

I giggle. “You know that’s not a demon trait. Most everyone will do anything that suits them and their purposes. So, what purpose do you want from me?”

“You don’t have anything this weekend, do you?”

“Are you trying to insinuate that I don’t have a life?” I demand.

“Well, you do come home to see me every weekend. You are most attentive to my lessons, and you don’t mention many friends at all. I assume you don’t have a boyfriend because you know better than to start dating without my meeting and approving him first.”

“Dad! This is not the Middle Ages!”

“Maybe not,” he grunts, “but call me old-fashioned. I want to know any gentleman who wants to court you.”

“No one courts anyone anymore,” I tell him, half-exasperated.

“They should,” he grumbles. “Courting is better than dating and that Netflix and chill? You are never doing that, young lady, do you hear me?”

“You really know how to set ground rules like a strict parent,” I say. “What about going with the fly, going with the flow, letting your

hair down…”

“You can let down your hair, all right, so long as your clothes are on,” he says firmly.

“Wow. Okay, then.”

“But there is no guy.” He pauses. “Is there?”

I heave a sigh. “No, Dad.”

“Good.”

“You want me to be an old maid?”

“Yes.”

“Really, Dad?”

“Can you blame me?”

“Yes, I actually can.”

He laughs, and I grin. Why can’t Mom ever see this side of Dad? He’s a demon, yes, so he’s fire and brimstone when he’s furious. He doesn’t get mad. He bypasses mad and will be livid, infuriated, irate, all of that. He’ll kill people who wrong him, and he will seek revenge. There’s no mistaking what he is, but he’s not evil. Not all the time at least, and he’s stopped killing without a reason long ago.

“My question is whether or not you asked specifically for this weekend to be off,” Dad says.

“You want me to come home now for a lesson and switch my weekend off to another one.”

“Precisely. Unless there’s a dance or other school event?”

“No. I just wanted to enjoy the blood moon.”

“Oh, well, you know, you can do that here because guess what? You can see the blood moon here too!” Dad gasps.

I gasp too. “No way. The moon there is red too?”

“It is!”

I burst out laughing. “Fine. I’ll come home now. I’ll be there—”

“You can always teleport.”

Startled, I suck in a breath. I’ve teleported short distances before, always with Dad’s supervision. Teleporting this large of a distance is a lot more complex.

And it’s also a demonic power, not a werewolf ability.

“You can do it,” he encourages.

“Are you home?” I ask. I bite my lower lip.

“No, but I can leave a map for you on the table.”

There are a few ways he can do this. Teleport back to the house to do it and then leave again. Manipulate across the world to affect the map and put it on the table. Or… I’m sure there might be another way or two that he can handle it. Maybe astral projection.

“Where are you?” I ask suspiciously.

“You’ll find out. You can see where I am on the map and then teleport again.”

Panic sets in, and I grip my phone almost tight enough to crack the case. “Dad, I don’t know if I can handle teleporting to a place I’ve never been before. That’s—”

“Advanced, yes, but you’re my daughter. I know what you can handle.” He pauses again. “Do you trust me?”

“Trust has to be earned, Father.”

“Oh! Ho! So I’m Father now, am I? And what exactly have I done that would make you not trust me?”

I blow out a breath. "You think too highly of me."

“You don’t think highly enough of yourself. You can do this,” he repeats, and I sense an undercurrent of desperation in his voice.

My dad. Desperate. Hmm.

Now, I’m intrigued.

Curiosity isn’t always a good thing, but I’ve been curious about my dad and his dealings for a long while now. He doesn’t let me know anything about any of his businesses, and I think it’s far past time for me to learn about all of the pies he has fingers in. He has crumbs all over his face all of the time—not literally, of course—but he won’t actually give me any details.

It makes me feel left out. It’s the biggest reason why I can’t say he’s my favorite parent. Mom holds back because I’m part-demon, but Dad holds back too in different ways.

It’s beyond infuriating.

While I don’t know why he wants me to return home right this very moment, I’m willing to if it means I might learn something that he’s been keeping from me for a very long time.

“Maybe I can. Maybe I can’t.”

“Do or do not.”

"Dad, you don't have green skin," I say, picturing the little green Jedi my dad is quoting. Yoda is as far from my dad as possible.

“So? Red skin is better anyhow.”

“I’m sure your horns are showing.”

He laughs, and I smile. Dad only has red skin when he morphs into his demonic state. A lot of demons have horns no matter what form they take, but my dad can make his so small that they're hardly bumps on his head. His thick black hair conceals them perfectly. I have his hair color, as Mom is blond. Where my white strands of hair come from, I'm not sure. Dad's eyes are black unless he's furious. Then, they're as red as a vampire's. I have Mom's eyes, only mine glow all the time. I don't know if that's a half-werewolf, half-demon thing or not. Honestly, I love my eyes, so that those bullies like to mock them infuriates me all the more.

“You’ll come?” he asks.

I close my eyes, press a hand to my heart, my other hand holding

the phone tightly, and shift my body through space. When I open my eyes again, I'm standing in the front foyer of my house.

Well, I say house, but it's a mansion. It's the largest house in the entire human city. I still think it's weird to live among the humans, given who we are, my parents and I. We might be able to pass as humans and walk among them, but we can't be ourselves around them. They can't ever know who we are, that we aren't just the stuff of legends and myths. It would risk war.

On the table is the map. I eye it and hone in on the spot marked off. Shadow Thicket. It's near Ashburn Mountains. In Dad's slanted script, he wrote, "Clearing."

Because I can mentally picture a clearing in the middle of a forest I've never set foot in before. I don't even know if the clearing is in the middle of the forest or if it's more to the north or west or southeast…

"Bellanore?" Dad says, the phone still pressed against my ear. "Are you there?"

"Still wondering what's in it for me if I do this," I mumble.

"Still?" He laughs, but the sound is a little more forced this time. "I didn't realize you wanted something in addition to a swapped weekend."

"You know me. Always pressing my luck."

"If I didn't love you…"

I close my eyes and try to reach out to the earth, to the soil, to the mountains. They're so huge that it's easier to connect to that than the forest, but then I find the forest, find the roots of the trees, and there… there… to the northeast is the clearing.

Before I can double-check myself, before I can talk myself out of going for it, I make the leap into the unknown and teleport.

When I open my eyes, I'm standing in a clearing. My dad is looming above the form of a man who is sitting on a rock, his hands and wrists bound. The man's lips quiver, and I can smell the stench of fear on him. It's like a tangy scent, a bit bitter.

"Bellanore!" Dad says with a wide grin. "I told you you could do it."

I hang up my phone and shove it into the pocket of my skirt. It's not a school day, so I'm not in uniform, but I tend to wear skirts and dress over pants.

"I'm here, yes. We can talk about the terms of what I'm owed later," I say with more bravado than I'm feeling because I'm sweating bullets. If I misjudged, if I teleported into a tree… I would be dead right now.

But I didn't. I'm here safe and sound, and if I can do it to reach one place I've never been to before, I can do it again.

I can teleport anywhere.

It's such a feeling of wild freedom that I can't help the wide smile stretching across my face.

Dad smirks. "Sure we can," he says in a tone that suggests the opposite.

I ignore him and focus on the bound man.

"Bellanore, this is Draz," my dad says. "He's an associate of mine."

"Do you always bound your associates?" I mutter, but inwardly, I am so very utterly pleased with myself. Dad called me here for a reason. He needs me. Not only that, an associate? Dad's introducing me to an associate? This has to deal with his business!

Finally!

I clear my throat and wait impatiently for Dad's response.

Dad wanders closer to Draz and waves me over. I'm so hopped up on excitement that I teleport over to stand beside him even though it would've only taken me five steps.

Dad smirks and lays a hand on my shoulder. "You know how you can smell sins?" he asks me.

My eyes widen, and I nod.

Draz's eyes widen too. He's an imp, I can tell just by looking at him. He's human-sized, but that's because he can manipulate his shape. Normally, he'll be more like three and a half feet tall. His ears are pointed, like a fairy's or an elf's, and his nose is shaped like a button. His cheeks are as red as strawberries, and he looks like he would eat his hat if he could. His eyes are huge, almost double the size of a human's. The whites of his eyes aren't white. They're black, his eye coloring almost gold.

"Your father—" he starts.

But Dad doesn't let him say more than that. He places a hand on my shoulder as he says, "I need to learn if Draz here is being honest or deceitful. Do you think you can help me with that?"

I blink a few times and then nod. "Yes, Dad, of course I can. Now, what's this all about?"

"You see, I was—"

Again, Dad cuts off the imp. "Draz here was supposed to bring me a certain item. Now, he's telling me that he can't. I want to know why he can't do what he promised me he would do."

"I told…" Draz hesitates. I think it's because he suspects Dad will cut him off again, but this time, Dad lets the imp talk. "I told your dad the truth. There's no way to get him what he wants. I will, though. When I can. If he'll just give me more time, I'm sure I can get it for 'im."

Ah, there it is. Pure as day. Draz is lying. Surely Dad can see that he's sweating. It's not from nerves. He's trembling like a leaf. If there was any wind tonight, he would fall over even though he's using

magic to add at least two feet to his normal-sized frame. The stench of sulfur clings to him, the stench of not only lies but fear.

Draz is afraid of my dad. He doesn't want to disappoint Dad, but he also doesn't want Dad to have whatever this particular item is. It hasn't escaped my notice that neither of them is saying what exactly said item is.

"Well?" Dad asks gruffly. "What's the case? Is he lying or telling me the truth?"

I stare Draz straight in his beady little eyes. He's staring straight at me, but he's quaking in his boots, or he would be if he were actually wearing boots instead of… Are those clogs? Even with my enhanced senses, I can't make out what's on his feet in the darkness of night. We're in a clearing, but the clouds have covered the red moon, and I just can't see his feet. Not that it matters any.

I'm stalling. Dad knows it, and Draz is sweating even more now.

"Well?" Dad repeats, his impatience growing.

I hesitate. There's a darkness around Dad. It's always been there, but most of the time, around me at least, the darkness clings to the edges. Now, it's illuminating him entirely in a dark aura that's almost like a glowing halo of black surrounding him. It's the same with Draz. Whatever they're into, it's dark and nearly evil.

Or maybe pure evil.

Dad is a demon, after all. Maybe I've been too blind to his sins because he's my dad, and I want to believe that he's not like the rest of his kind.

Dad didn't raise me to be naïve, but maybe Mom has the right of it by distancing herself from him.

In a word, I'm utterly confused, but maybe I can try to figure out what's going on. There's no way Dad will tell me the truth.

But can I really trust an imp of all paranormal beings?

"He's telling the truth," I lie smoothly.

Dad narrows his eyes. "Is that so?" he asks. "Well, then, I'm sorry, Draz. I never should've doubted you. You want more time? You have a day."

"A d-day?" Draz stutters. "I need more time than that."

"You've already had more time than I would've liked," Dad grumbles. "Bellanore, be a dear and untie Draz. The imp needs to go about and finish up our business."

"Of course." I do as Dad directs.

Draz watches me the entire time. As soon as he's freed, he rubs his wrists, nods to me, and he promptly teleports away.

Dad eyes me. "You sure about Draz?"

I snort. "Are you sure about doing business with an imp?"

"I know what I'm doing so long as I can trust my people."

I grin and rub the back of my neck. “I’m sure it just eats you alive that you can’t smell sins like I can.”

“You would think all demons can do that, but no. We aren’t all created equal.”

I fake a yawn. “If you don’t need anything else…”

“You’re leaving already?”

“I’m a bit tired. It’s not just smelling sins.”

“No?” Dad asks, eyeing me critically.

“The teleporting like I did,” I fib.

“Yes. You did do well. I told you to trust me, didn’t I?”

“And I did.”

“And I trust you too,” he says, his tone both softer and harder.

“As you should,” I say smoothly.

“Come here. Give me a hug.”

I hug him, and he squeezes me tighter than normal. Does he suspect? Maybe, but too late now.

I pull away, nod, grin, and I blink out of there, leaving him behind in a flash and teleporting, this time to Ashburn Mountains. I don’t know if this is where the imp will be or not, but I need to stay nearby, so I can try and sense him.

I’ve barely a moment to even take a breath to settle myself from teleporting yet again when there’s the imp sitting on the stone in front of me.

Draz gives me a big, old, impish grin. “I just wanted to say that I give to those who help me. What do you want? I always pay me debts.”

“Is that so?” I ask dryly. In the back of my mind, I wonder if this is all a setup, if Dad is testing my loyalty. It wouldn’t surprise me in the least for Dad to pull something like that.

“Yes. Name your price. Within reason. Or out of reason.” He shrugs and holds out his hands. “If you want something more than I think is fair, you can earn it by doing a bit more for me.”

“I saved your neck from a demon,” I say dryly. “How much is your life worth? Because anything I ask for is going to be plenty fair.”

Draz narrows his eyes. “You’re a demon’s daughter, all right,” he mumbles. “More than you are a werewolf’s daughter. So, Ronath’s daughter, tell me what it is you want most.”

“No, not what I want most. What I want from you.”

The imp flashes that grin again. “Of course. Whatever you want, Ronath’s daughter.”

“I have a name.”

“Indeed, you do.”

I narrow my eyes. Hadn’t he heard my dad say it before? There’s power with a person’s name, so maybe it’s just as well he isn’t calling

by mine.

"Why don't you tell me what my dad wants from you?" I ask smoothly.

Draz swallows hard.

"Or you could tell me why you don't have it for my dad. Oh, wait… You do have it, and we both know that. Take your pick. What are you going to tell me?"

I suck in a breath as the imp mulls things over.

"And remember," I say grimly, "I can tell if you're lying."

"Your father… he's weaving a tangled web," Draz says. "It's not something you want to get involved in. You can trust me on that."

"You're an imp who's in cahoots with a demon," I say, my tone drier than the Sahara Desert. "Do you really think I'm dumb enough to trust you?"

Gone is every trace of him being an imp, and his face actually looks earnest, and his aura glows with a brightness that screams innocence.

"Please, for your sake, don't look into what your dad is doing. Don't look into it. Stop trying to find out. You won't like what you'll learn, and if he tries to rope you into it…"

"He already did tonight," I point out.

Draz shakes his head. "No, I mean to actually be in business with him. You don't want that. Please. I'm looking out for you. I… Eep!"

He's looking over my shoulder, and he's gone in a flash, and I teleport back to my room before I can blink. I don't want to know who or what Draz saw, but I'm shaking. My entire body is trembling, and I curl up into my bed. Not that I think I'm going to sleep anytime soon, but the night of the blood moon has certainly taken a turn that I never thought it would've.

And to think that originally, all I wanted to do was to see the red moon. Instead, I feel like I'm Little Miss Muffet caught in a spider's web, just waiting to be devoured.

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Chapter 6

Robb

You can’t believe the fairy tales.

There’s no loophole.

There’s no such thing as a curse breaker.

I’m doomed.

A curse is a curse is a curse.

The moon is red tonight. It's red every year for one night. Why? I don't know. Ask a vampire. They might know. After all, from the word around campus, it seems that the vampires have some kind of ball on the night of the blood moon. The Red Moon Ball. I bet they probably round up a bunch of humans or maybe even enemies and drain them of blood until they're completely dead. Or maybe they hunt werewolves. Everyone knows vampires and werewolves hate each other, but honestly, I don't know any vampires personally. A vampire didn't give me my scar.

Another sort of monster did.

As I pause my walk along the graveled moonlight path and stare at the blood moon, a tingling sensation washes over me. I’m being watched.

Imperceptibly, I glance over my shoulder and spy Roald Jagger. As much as I wish to avoid the so-called "rough crowd," they don't seem to realize that I am not one of them. As much as they pretend that the lot of them are lone wolves, I am the one true lone wolf, and I do not mind that in the slightest. They, however, see fit to come and bother me at every turn, hardly ever giving me a moment's peace. It's a wonder that I haven't abandoned this venture that is Moonstone Academy because, in all of the time I've been here so far, I've learned precisely nothing.

I continue to gaze upward at the moon, pretending I do not realize the others are stalking me, and just before they can attempt to startle me if that is their aim, I whirl around, my face and claws transformed.

The lot of them jump back, and I cannot help smirking a bit.

Once I revert my face back to him, I ask. "What is it you want?" My

tone is a bit harsh.

Roald hisses and reveals his long canines. “What’s gotten you in such a foul mood, Robb?” he asks. “We’re on the prowl for a bit of fun, and we thought you might want in.”

As I often have to do around them, I close my eyes to prevent myself from rolling them. I’m sure it won’t be the last time. “And just what is this fun?” I ask.

“Well…” Roald glances at Decker.

It’s Elliot who answers. “We’re goin’ to Blood Haven.”

“The vampires’ academy? Why under the moon would we do that?”

“Because of their ball,” Decker says.

“We want to crash it.” Roald flashes his teeth again.

“Crash it,” I repeat numbly.

“You do know what that means, don’t you?” Elliot asks, making it sound like I’m ignorant.

“You all want to pick fights with vampires on their turf,” I say dryly. “That doesn’t sound smart to me.”

“I would’ve thought that you had the look of someone who wouldn’t mind a go with a vampire,” Roald says.

His tone is mild, but the glint in his eyes is dark. Even so, he doesn't scare me. He acts tough, but when it comes down to it, I don't think he's much of a predator. If I have to guess, he's the kind of werewolf who will back down from a fight and cower away rather than give in to his baser instincts and fight to the death.

Not that I’ve fought anyone to the death myself.

Not yet at least.

I might have to one day if I’m to survive.

“Are you going to come with us or not?” Nia asks.

“Why do you think this is a good idea?” I counter.

Decker snorts. “Why do we need an excuse to beat up some vampires? They’re terrible, wicked creatures, and they should be put out of their miseries.”

“Have you spoken with many vampires?” I ask.

“No, but what does that matter?”

“Not all vampires are evil. Not all of them kill—”

Nia groans. “You actually mean to say that you don’t hate vampires?”

“I’m supposed to hate them why?” I ask. “I’m sorry if I don’t just fall in line with stupid prejudices—”

“Are you calling us stupid?” Nia growls.

“Hardly.” I snort. “I called prejudices stupid. Keep up.”

“I’m starting to get really sick—” Nia starts.

Roald cuts her off. “Come or not, we don’t care, but you aren’t

telling anyone that we're going."

"He has more important things to do with his time like staring up at the blood moon and wishing he was a vampire instead of a werewolf," Nia says with a sneer.

I grin at her, flashing my teeth. "Actually, I don't wish I was a vampire, and I also don't have anything else to do. I suppose I might as well come along."

"Good." Roald rubs his hands together. He looks so very pleased.

Honestly, this is the worst of ideas for them. I don't truly want to babysit tonight, but if I don't, there's going to be blood spilt. I can just tell, and I don't think taking the rivalry to that level is a smart idea, not at all.

"I haven't been close to a vampire in months," Decker says.

"Why was that?" Roald asks.

"I was thinking about attacking one."

"He only thought it because of my experience in Silver Ironwoods," Elliot says smugly.

"And what experience was this?" Roald hisses.

"I almost bit a vampire in the leg," Elliot says, proudly puffing out his chest.

"You *almost* bit a vampire," I repeat. "How…"

"Thrilling," Nia finishes with a smirk. "I'm so very proud of you!" She clasps her hands to her chest in a mocking show of delight. "And what happened next?"

"The vampire ran off," Elliot mumbles in a rush.

I burst out laughing. "I'm sure he did. Or was the vampire a she?"

Elliot's cheeks flush.

"Ah, a female," I say unnecessarily.

"You went after a female vampire?" Decker snorts.

"What's that matter?" Elliot snaps.

"You left out that detail before, but of course you did."

"Why didn't you mention all of this earlier?" Roald demands. "You were in Silver Ironwoods as your wolf alone?"

"Maybe," Elliot mumbles, his tone now sullen. I bet he wishes he never mentioned it in the first place.

"What exactly happened?" Roald asks through gritted teeth. He actually almost sounds like an alpha.

Elliot gulps. "Forget about it," he grumbles. "Let's just go and—"

"No. We want the whole story. You fought a vampire. We're about to go see hundreds of them. Let's hear about your experience." Roald holds out his hands and glances at the others.

Decker is nodding, Nia smirking. Me? I have my arms crossed. The more we delay, the better, but it's clear that the fight didn't end well for Elliot or something else embarrassing happened, or else he

would've told us all long ago, when it all went down. He and Decker fight like brothers, always trying to one-up each other, so that explains why he mentioned at least a few details to Decker.

"Go on then," Nia says, suddenly sounding bored. "or else we'll leave you behind."

"You wouldn't!" Elliot says hotly.

"We will." Roald glowers at the blond werewolf.

"Fine! She…" Elliot glares at me before clearing his throat. "She bared her fangs at me, and I lunged, just missing her leg. She, ah, she kicked me."

"Where?" Nia asks.

"You don't need to know where," Elliot gripes.

"We do. If there's a fight at the ball, we need to know what they might do." She taps her foot, hands on her hips. "We're waiting."

Elliot huffs out a breath but says nothing.

"The face," I say.

The others turn to me.

"Think about it. He was rushing right at her to bite her leg, right? She probably jumped straight back and then kicked him head-on."

"That so?" Roald asks.

Elliot bares his teeth. "Yes, she kicked me square on the snout. I flew backward and slammed into a tree. When I got back on my feet again, she was gone. She was terrified of me, and that's why she ran! She knew she couldn't handle a real fight—"

"I'm sure that's the case," Nia says, rolling her eyes. "Can we go now?"

And we go. Decker teases Elliot. Roald still gripes that Elliot didn't tell him earlier. Nia is silent, and so am I.

Silver Ironwoods is right next to Moonstone Academy. Are any of the others wondering why a vampire came to be so close to our territory? Not that I honestly care, but I don't feel like others do. The werewolves will not want a vampire hanging around so close to campus.

There aren't any guards patrolling the edge of Blood Haven Academy, so I'm not sure when we cross over, aside from the way Roald acts like he's top dog and the grins on Decker's and Elliot's faces.

"Stick together," Roald dictates. "We're a pack, after all."

I snort.

Roald curls his upper lip at me. I smirk in return. He doesn't speak for me, and I don't have to do what he says.

The others, though, including Nia, stick together, but I take my time, looking around. Honestly, this isn't smart at all. They're asking for a fight…

I suppose I am too considering I'm here, but the vampires that I can see in the near distance all have blood-red eyes. We're going to stick out by sight and by smell, and it's not going to be good.

I'm not sure why, but I notice two vampires standing close together, away from everyone else. The other werewolves aren't with me anymore, and I turn to give the couple some privacy.

"And my father…"

"Is he a vampire?"

"My mother is. He's a demon." She exhales slowly.

My back stiffens. A demon? She must be one of those living vampires then. Traditional vampires are made from bites, and as far as I know, that kind greatly outnumbers the living kind.

Curious now, I eye the two with more interest. The blood moon casts a red halo over them, making them glow. Her hair is brown and wavy, but he has a shaggy mop of brown hair that reminds me of a student in one of my classes.

But that would mean…

Julian? Julian Moonblaze is here.

His normally light green eyes are red.

Clearly, he's here for a reason far different from the rough crowd.

"You aren't your father," Julian is saying smoothly. "You aren't your mother. You are you. That's it. You are defined by your actions, by your thoughts, by your beliefs. You don't have to hate what you are, though. Not all vampires are evil. Even some demons have to be good."

"You don't know many demons, do you?" she asks dryly.

He chuckles. "I don't have to. Not every person in any type of being or creature is wholly evil."

"That's easy enough to say, but—"

I don't want to hear this. My stomach can't handle talk of demons and the like. With a scowl, I stalk away from them. It's time to convince the others to return to Moonstone. There are far too many werewolves here, but even so, the vampires outnumber us greatly. If a fight breaks out, it will be a blood bath.

I'm fairly certain that is exactly what Nia and Roald want.

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Chapter 7

Robb

It doesn't take me long to find the others. All I have to do is listen to the sound of snarling above the music playing as well as smell fur instead of the slight stench of necrosis that permeates from the traditional vampires. After all, they are dead, reanimated flesh, but they aren't quite decaying like zombies are. They smell like death because they are dead, but their flesh isn't putrefying. The living vampires shouldn't smell like that, but I haven't been close enough to one to know if my theory is right, and I don't want to know for certain. I suppose I can ask Julian. He'll know the answer.

But I won't. I haven't spoken to Julian yet, and I see no reason to now. He can do as he pleases, but there had been no doubting it. He had been flirting with the vampire. Combined with the red eyes… Is he trying to trick her for some nefarious purpose? Why did he come here? He doesn't truly want to pursue a relationship with her, does he? If he does, how long does he think he can continue to masquerade as a vampire? She will learn the truth, and she will likely bite him as a result. She has demon blood in her, and demons are evil. They're terrible, wicked creatures from the belly of Hell, and I don't know how Julian can try to claim otherwise.

The rough crowd is gathering around two vampires, but the thing is, there are five vampires on the outer edges surrounding them. Do they even realize there are seven vampires? Because they're shifting into their wolves, staring down the two male vampires inside their circle, and not one of them is looking around.

With a grunt and a flash of reddish fangs from the glint of the blood moon, the fighting starts. At least the werewolves have the presence of mind not to howl, but the fighting, it's vicious. The werewolves are nipping, snapping their jaws, kicking, holding their own.

Until the other vampires descend.

A bitter feeling washes over me. This, all of this, all of the werewolves here, including Julian and any others who came along

with him, was a mistake. No werewolves should be here.

Nia is the smallest werewolf, but she's also the fastest. She strikes a paw across a vampire's face, cutting him, and then she's dancing away and lashing out at another one. If she could laugh, I think she just might.

Roald, unsurprisingly, is trying to act like he's the alpha, taking on four of them himself. His hubris will be his downfall.

A streak of wind rushes by me. Another vampire is here, and she's heading straight toward Decker. He's so focused on the vampire he's attacking that he'll be blindsided. He'll be bitten, drained.

He'll be killed.

But Elliot whacks a vampire right into the vampire about to go after Decker, and I breathe a sigh of relief.

Until I realize Nia is about to kill a vampire.

This has gone on far enough, and I race over, still a human, and I'm just in time to grab the vampire's cloak and choke him out of the way.

Nia glowers at me, standing tall before snarling and crouching backward as if she's ready to pounce at me, but I'm done.

This entire thing is done.

From my pocket, I remove a pouch of haze avitores. Before Nia can jump me, I'm already climbing the nearest tree. I climb all the way to the top and then dump out the haze avitores. A shimmering fog descends, white and full of luster, but the moment it touches fur or skin, the fog turns black. Memory fades away, and the vampires rush off.

Even the werewolves run away, and I have no choice but to turn into my wolf to stay alongside the others. Once we return to Moonstone, I'm the first to become human.

Roald shakes his head. "What just happened?" He glances down at his torn clothes. Any wounds he received have all healed already.

His bafflement is identical to Decker's and Elliot's, and the trio promptly starts to argue with one another. They wander off ahead, but Nia lingers behind.

"You…" She narrows her eyes. "Why do you keep haze avitores on you?"

It didn't work on her. It wouldn't work on me, but that's because I've used it on myself until I grew tolerant of the herbs' properties. Why would she do the same?

"I heard a whisper that you all might want to go over, and I don't think a war is a good idea."

"You don't think we can take on the bloodsuckers?" She bares her teeth. "And what about what you did?"

I scoff a bitter laugh. "What, with the vampire? The one

pretending to attack you? He side-eyed Elliot. He was toying with you, and Elliot's back was turned. The vampire would've killed him. You might not realize this, Nia, but you aren't the only werewolf."

Her nostrils flare. "You think you're so big and tough, but I didn't see you fight. The others might not realize what happened, but I remember." She stalks toward me and jabs her finger into my chest. "And I won't forget."

She marches away, but her threats don't scare me. I know far more terrifying creatures than the likes of her.

Still, she might prove a complication I don't need.

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Chapter 8

Bellanore

Ellamaria knocks on my open door and strolls right over to where I'm sitting on my bed. "Did you hear the news?"

"What news?"

"I suppose you wouldn't have. You ran off that night. Where were you?"

"Which night?" I ask, even though I have a feeling I know which night she's referring to. Today is Monday. The night of the blood moon had been Friday."

"Friday, of course!" She flops onto my bed, sitting on the edge. "I heard that some werewolves sneaked over to the Red Moon Ball."

"Blood Haven Academy?" I ask. "Why would they do that?"

"I don't know. I don't think there was a fight or anything, but if werewolves can make it onto their campus without being detected, you know they'll go back, and next time, there *will* be a fight."

I just shake my head. "You're sure there wasn't a fight?" I ask dubiously. "Why would werewolves want to go over there?"

"Why else, right? That's the only thing I can think of." Ellamaria shrugs. "I'm trying to learn who went over, but everyone is being rather tight-lipped about the whole thing."

"I suppose they might not want to get into trouble," I say dryly.

"I guess," she says, doubt coloring the two words. "You would think the ones most prone toward violence wouldn't be able to shut up about a fight, so maybe there really hadn't been any violence. It's just baffling, you know?"

I nod a few times, my mind racing.

"Are you going to race?" she asks.

"Not today."

Ellamaria just shakes her head. "You know you have to run a certain number of miles each year, right?"

"I'll get them in."

"The races are more fun than just running for the sake of running." She huffs a sigh. "Fine. I'll race. Meet up with me for dinner after?"

I nod, and she nearly skips away. She likes to puzzle things out. It's not that she's a fan of gossip, and even I have to admit that all of this is very, very interesting.

But my mind turns to my father and, in turn, to my cousin. I don't know her very well, but Romelia Covenshade is my cousin. She's a vampire with a vampire mother named Caterina and a demon father named Magmar. We are related through our demonic side, obviously.

I don't have her number, and I'm not about to call her parents to alert them to what might be a bad situation. Instead, I opt to call Blood Haven. My heart pounds as the phone rings.

"Hello, this is Blood Haven Academy. Emil speaking," a clear, male voice says. "How may I assist you this fine evening?"

"Hi, yes. I'm calling to speak with a student who attends there."

"Name?"

"Romelia Covenshade. If you could direct my call to her—"

"I'm afraid I can't."

My heart skips a beat, and I hold the phone even tighter in my grasp. My nerves already had me gripping it tighter than strictly necessary. "Why not? Is she hurt? Is she—"

"She's fine." He chuckles. "Vampires are made of stern stock, after all."

I force a giggle. "Of course."

"There was an… incident."

"An incident?" My mouth is dry, and my throat burns.

"Yes. It seems that a few of the students got into an altercation."

"When?" The word comes out a squeak.

"During classes today."

I breathe a deep sigh of relief, and then I realize she might still be hurt. "Is she all right?"

"Yes, but it seems she was involved in the altercation, so she is, ah, rather indisposed right now because of her punishment."

"Oh, okay. Thank you for letting me know."

"Would you like for me to pass on a message?" he asks.

"No, no, that's all right. I just… I'm glad she's all right." I hesitate. "I hope the altercation wasn't too serious."

"It's… I shouldn't say," he mumbles.

"Oh, no. I wouldn't want you to get into any trouble."

"It's just some graffiti that popped up on campus," he says. "The students are convinced that some werewolves sneaked onto the campus during the ball, and as a result, the vampires are furious."

"The graffiti…"

"They're terrible pictures of grotesque art of vampires fighting werewolves."

"But there wasn't a fight," I say slowly.

"No. Oh, no. And I don't know if I can believe that a werewolf, let alone more than one, actually came to be here. No, that's ridiculous."

“Yes, of course it is,” I say numbly. “Thank you so much, sir. I appreciate your knowledge.”

“Don’t mention it.” He pauses and then adds, his words taking on a pleading quality, “Please don’t mention it.”

I try to laugh, but it gets caught in my throat and turns into a cough. Without another word, I hang up. For a moment, I stare at my phone, and then I call up my dad.

He answers on the sixth ring. I don’t know why, but he never picks up on any other ring. Is it because he wants to make people wait? To show that he’s busy? Beats me.

“Daughter,” Dad says cheerfully. “What is it you need?”

“I don’t need anything.”

“No?”

“Just an answer to a question.”

“Ah, so you do need something,” he points out.

“Yeah, yeah,” I mumble.

“You may ask one question,” he asks with a lofty air that he uses with me to tease but others to intimidate.

Another reason why he can’t be my favorite parent. He does use others, maybe even abuses them. He treats me well because I’m his daughter, but if circumstances ever change, if I weren’t his daughter…

Then, I would have to look out.

“Did you know that werewolves were going to sneak to Blood Haven? Supposedly, a fight didn’t break out, but I’m wondering if you purposely asked Draz about your business on that night to ensure I wouldn’t be caught up in all of it.”

“Does that matter?” Dad counters. “After all, as you said, a fight didn’t break out.”

“As far as I know, a fight didn’t break out.”

“You think your intel is faulty?”

“I don’t know, but I find it rather peculiar for werewolves to want to go over there for a benevolent reason.”

“Ah, that’s my daughter. So distrusting. I love it.”

I purse my lips. He didn’t answer my question. “Dad?” I grumble.

“Why are you asking me this?” Dad questions. “Would you have gone?”

If I found out about werewolves wanting to sniff around a vampires’ ball, would I have gone with them? Maybe, but it would’ve only been to ensure that no one got hurt.

Hmm. I can almost picture Romelia, my cousin, doing something similar. Maybe that’s how she got in trouble. Wonder what the punishment is that she’s suffering. Probably something fitting for a

vampire.

If Ellamaria asked me to go with her, I'm not sure I would want to, come to think of it. Yes, I would've had a chance to see Romelia, but we're cousins. We aren't really friends. We don't know each other all that well.

"No," I finally mutter. "I wouldn't have gone."

"Why don't you come over?" Dad asks. "I think you're ready for something a bit more… dangerous. You can't dare tell your mother about this."

I grit my teeth. I hate when Dad does this, tries to pit himself against Mom to try to get me to do something. He turns it into a game, and it's not something I want to play.

But he does know that curiosity is my vice, and I bite my lower lip. "Can I have a hint?"

"Now, now, you know that's not how this works," he admonishes. "Will you come?"

"Where to?" I exhale a sigh, wondering if he notices that I didn't agree just yet.

"Gravennora Savanna."

A grassland to the south.

"Can you be a bit more specific, Dad?" I ask dryly. "That's a huge area."

"The boulder."

There's a huge rock in the northwest of the grassland. It's not too far from an overhand and a steep cliff down to a low, lazy river that's drying up more and more every year.

"What do you say?" Dad asks. "You ready for an adventure that is far superior to maybe fighting a few vampires?"

I shrug. "I don't want to fight vampires."

"Who do you want to fight?"

"No one."

"Peace isn't won by ignoring disagreements," he admonishes.

"What disagreement do I have with vampires?"

"You don't hate vampires on sight?"

"You do know I'm related to one, right?"

"Yes, yes," he says, and I'm sure he's waving his hand to dismiss me. "A distant cousin. Do you think she would come to your aid if you called?"

"Maybe."

"I doubt it."

"You doubt everyone," I counter.

"And you should too."

Hmm. Does he mean I should doubt him as well?

Probably. And I probably should.

Immediately, guilt overwhelms me. Dad does the best he can for me, and just because he is a demon doesn't mean he doesn't want what's best for me. He just has a twisted way of going about things.

"But tonight, I'm asking you to trust me," Dad continues.

"It's Monday night. I have school tomorrow."

"If you want to make an excuse, that's fine, but you can teleport here and teleport back. You can still get plenty of rest so you won't be a bear in the morning."

"Dad, I'm a werewolf. I can't shift into anything other than a wolf."

"Are you so sure about that?" he asks.

My heart skips a beat. "W-What are you saying?"

"What do you think I'm saying?"

Demons.

Demons can shapeshift into all kinds of things.

I'm half-demon.

Does that mean…

My mouth hangs open.

"If you trust me, come to the boulder."

Dad hangs up.

I can hear footsteps outside my room. Maybe it's Ellamaria back from her race, and if she comes to the door, she'll want to talk.

If I want to see what Dad wants to talk to me about or show me or teach me, I have to go now.

So I do. I teleport to the boulder, standing on top of it even though there's a risk that Dad will be sitting on it.

Instead, he's standing with his back to me, hands clasped behind him as he stares at the moon.

"Good of you to join me, my wolf."

I swallow hard. Dad hasn't called me that since I turned five. Why he stopped calling me that I don't know. It's a little disconcerting to realize just how much I don't know.

"I'm glad you trust me," he says, turning around.

It's only then that I smell the harsh bitterness of smoke. There's a long patch of fire burning the grass behind him in a perfectly long rectangular area.

"You do trust me, don't you?" my dad asks as he moves to stand behind me, his hands resting on my shoulders.

I say nothing. My eyes already burn from the smoke.

"Go on," he urges, giving me a push.

"Go on, and what?" I ask.

"Walk through the fire."

"You want me to what?" I screech.

"Walk through the flames."

"No." I shake my head frantically. My entire body is trembling.

I won’t do this. I won’t!

“I would never ask you to do something you can’t do,” Dad says patiently.

I shake my head again. “No.”

“You don’t trust me?”

Unmistakable fear races through me, and I take a step back, colliding with him. He’s asking far too much of me. I can’t. I’ll burn.

“I’m not a dragon,” I hiss. “I can’t survive walking through fire. I’ll burn to death!”

“Fire is a part of a demon. Fire burns in our veins.”

"I…" I shake my head, closing my eyes. Trying not to breathe in the smoke, but a sob bursts out.

In my shame and my cowardice, I teleport out of there without another word, not even a goodbye.

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Chapter 9

Robb

For the most part, I've been trying to keep to myself. Roald and his goons won't leave me be, though, and Nia… She knows too much. Every so often, I'll catch her watching me, and it's not because she has a crush on me. More like she wants to crush me. She doesn't trust me, and I don't trust her. She's violent.

To some extent, all werewolves are violent. It's in our nature, but if she thinks I'm going to just let her do whatever she wants, that she can pretend to be a good friend while steering the others down a dark path…

Dark paths only ever lead to one place.

Death.

Death is permanent.

Unless you come back as a ghost. There is that.

A faint smile curls my lips. I've managed to duck the rough crowd for lunch today, and mealtime is almost over, but then, before I can throw out my trash, they descend.

"Robb, you look a little thin," Roald points out.

A low growl rumbles from my chest. He doesn't know why I've lost weight, and it's not from a loss of appetite, although along with my numbness and lack of emotions, I don't have a healthy appetite anymore. I've lost weight because my body is eating away at itself.

The curse.

"You're not up to fightin' vampires, huh?" Elliot asks.

I glower at Nia. "Why are you talking about fighting vampires?"

"We thought about going to their campus the night of their ball, but…" Decker shakes his head, confused.

I purse my lips. "There's no need for that. You want sport? There are some hellhounds who race about a few miles north of here. Give them a chase. Up the stakes. Make bargains with them."

"Everyone knows you don't ever make a bargain with any creature from Hell," Elliot protests.

"Yeah, well, if you have a certain advantage…" I hold out my

hands.

“You mean cheat.” Nia snorts.

“How would you cheat?” Elliot asks.

He’s a bit too naïve for this crowd, a follower through and through. I feel sorry for him.

“A bone,” I throw out there.

“Which kind?” Decker asks.

I wink. “That’s the big question, isn’t it?”

“Have you raced a hellhound?” Roald asks.

I lift my chin. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

His gray eyes narrow. He doesn’t like being challenged, but if he’s going to ever try to officially be an alpha, he better get used to it because there’s no way Nia’s going to accept his authority. The other two might, but not Nia.

Before he can counter, a loud voice booms, “The princess of darkness thinks she’s too high and mighty to talk to us. If someone told you to ignore us so we’ll go away… that someone is as ignorant as you are.”

Decker glances over, and I might throw a few peeks that way too.

“Wyatt,” Roald says bitterly. A muscle in his jaw tweaks.

Nia smirks. “What’s wrong, Roald? Still bitter?”

I lift my eyebrows, confused. I don’t know Wyatt, which means I also don’t know the history between Wyatt and Roald.

“I’m ignoring you because you don’t deserve my attention,” a somewhat familiar voice says, the tone sweeter than honey. “Now, leave me be.”

"Or what?"

“Or I’ll make you leave me be.”

“Is that so?” Wyatt roars with laughter, and others join in. They’re crowding around someone, the girl talking back, but I can’t see her.

“What went down?” I ask, my attention torn between the rough crowd and the bullies.

“Wyatt, Jett, Gayle, and Mindy, they used to all be a part of us,” Decker explains.

“To some extent,” Elliot adds.

“They are all in the same pack, though,” Decker continues.

“Roald wanted them to deflect to us.”

“But Wyatt thought that if so many of us were in the same pack to start, that he should be the one to be alpha.”

“You two come to blows?” I ask Roald.

“It never came to that,” Roald says bitterly.

“Why not?”

“They deflected like Roald asks,” Nia crows. “They just deflected from us.”

“Wyatt’s the son of the alpha from Spark pack,” Elliot says. “For him to deflect is no small thing, but he tries to act like he’s the alpha for the teenagers of the pack. Not all of them hang around Wyatt, but if he does follow in his pa’s paws, well, they’ll have no choice but to obey him.”

“Or challenge him,” I mumble.

Roald eyes me and then slowly nods. “Maybe one day, one of them will challenge Wyatt,” he says, sounding satisfied.

Great. Just what I need to do, encourage Roald to sow my violence, this time in another pack.

“Why don’t we go see what Wyatt’s going on about?” Nia suggests.

“Let’s.” Roald motions for us to follow, but the crowd isn’t far away. In fact, it’s heading our way. The bullies’ target is trying to get away from them.

“Running away like a coward. You been out in the sun too long? I swear she’s part vampire. I mean, look at her. With that white hair, she looks like a freak with her strange eyes.”

Strange eyes? White hair? The girl I crossed had black hair with some white. Same girl or another one?

“Oh, so it’s Bellanore Shade,” Roald says as he worms his way into the circle. The rest of them—Elliot, Decker, and Nia—remain on the outside of the enclosure around her.

“Roald Jagger,” the target says in a slow drawl. “Why are you here? Still without a pack? Still trying to find someone to throw you a bone?”

“I don’t need a bone,” Roald hisses, “but if I change my mind, I’ll gnaw on one of yours.”

Wyatt starts to laugh. “You’re outnumbered, girl, and Roald has size on you. Do you honestly think you can take him?”

“Don’t underestimate me, Wyatt. That would be your second mistake.”

There’s a bit of tension, and I’m sure Wyatt is fuming at her bold claim, but he doesn’t rise to her bait and ask what the first mistake is.

Doesn’t matter. She opts to mention it anyhow.

“Your first mistake, of course, is to try to mess with me. You see, I eat up guys like you for breakfast, and I spit out the bones. I’m the one with bones to gnaw on.”

Wyatt snorts. At least I think he’s the one to snort. “You talk big, but you have no bite, no drive, no violence. All you do is talk. You never fight.”

“Oh, honey, that’s because I don’t fight fair.”

“That so?”

A gasp runs through the crowd, and I’m itching to know what happened, but I also don’t want to see.

Abruptly, the crowd parts. The girl with the black hair and some white and glowing green eyes is the target. She spies me as she stomps off.

A werewolf steps forward. He's decently big, broad-shouldered, and he has a rip on the sleeve of his uniform. I can smell blood from here.

He must've grabbed her, maybe by her hair because it looked a bit disheveled. She must've clawed him as a result.

Good for her.

Wyatt glowers at me as if this is all my fault, but I just shrug and ignore him.

That girl might be a spitball. A firecracker.

I think my opinion of her might have just changed a bit.

~

There's no doubting it. My opinion has changed because my final class of the day, predator instinct, I realize I have with her, and I make it a point to sit next to her. She sits in the front, like a good little girl, whereas I hang out in the back usually. It's not that I'm a slacker. I'm just bored.

I shouldn't be, though. I should be trying to do something about the curse, but I can't bring myself to have the motivation to. All I want to do is just survive.

But I won't. In the end, I won't survive.

But fighting for my life requires effort and a level of desire that I just can't bring myself to feel.

I can't feel anything. Not fright, not worry, not even the desire to live.

When I slide into the seat next to her, she glances over and rolls her eyes.

"I can't remember if you told me your name," I say.

"Why not just call me Princess of Darkness?" She looks at me for a fraction of a second before staring straight ahead of her. "You did hear Wyatt call me that, didn't you?"

"I might've. Why did he call you that?"

"Why does he do anything that he does? I'm not his keeper."

Her tone is frosty. I've warmed up to her, but she hasn't me. Was I even that terribly biting to her when we first met? I had a terribly rocky first day, and honestly, the days since haven't been that much better.

"I hate it here," I mumble.

"Why? You have… friends."

I snort. "I have no one."

“That so? You hang out with a rough crowd.”

I snort again. “If you think they’re rough, then you don’t know what true rough and tumble types are.”

“That you?”

“Not really.”

“Hmm.” She’s back to staring ahead again.

“I’m Robb,” I offer, holding out my hand for a shake.

She doesn’t bite, doesn’t look over, doesn’t say her name. She doesn’t say anything at all.

“‘Hi, Robb, nice to meet you,’” I say in a high-pitched tone.

“I don’t sound like that.”

“Yeah. Guess not. Must be because I can’t hear you saying that.”

“Maybe because it would be a lie.”

“Ouch. It’s not nice to meet me, huh?”

“I’m not in the mood to talk.”

“To anyone?” I ask. Maybe she just wants everyone to leave her alone.

“Oh, I would talk to my friends if they had this class with me.”

“You any good at this class?” I ask, attempting to ignore the slight.

She scowls. “Why would you think I am?”

“I don’t know if you are or if you aren’t,” I protest. “I haven’t been paying attention.”

“Not to the class either. You’re behind on the lessons.”

“I just… I can’t bring myself to care.”

“And there it is. That’s why you hang out with Roald and the others, isn’t it? Because you don’t care about who’s good or who wants to rile things up and have a fight every night.”

“There isn’t a fight every night,” I argue.

“No? You sure about that?”

I hesitate. “I don’t spend every second of the day and night with them.”

“So you don’t know—”

“I’m not their keeper,” I interrupt.

She eyes me, but there’s a blankness in her glowing eyes.

She really isn’t interested in me.

Why does that make me even more interested in her?

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Chapter 10

Bellanore

I tap my fingers impatiently on my desk. Where is Professor Narcissa? Of course today would be the day that she's running behind. She teaches a ton of courses here, and she's also one of the head faculty members on staff. This isn't the first time that she's late.

And she’s not the only one late. Ellamaria is too.

Just then, my best friend rushes in. She starts toward her customary seat, which Robb has claimed, and she comes to a halt. The look of utter confusion on her face would normally make me smile, but I’m not sure how to feel about the werewolf sitting next to me. He’s a puzzle, and for once, I’m not sure I’m curious enough to work him out. Yes, maybe it had been a little rude of me to look at his scar, but I was trying to appraise his face. His eyes glow. I’m the only werewolf here to have glowing eyes before he came here, so I wonder about his father or mother. Maybe he’s a half-demon too.

Would that explain why he hangs around Roald and the others? Although there doesn’t seem to be much love there.

“Is this your seat?” the subject of my thoughts says smoothly as he glides out of the seat.

“You can sit there. It’s not like it has my name on it,” Ellamaria says, all flustered.

He touches an engraving on the south left corner. “This isn’t your name?” His fingers trail along the engravings she etched with her nails the first week of school. “Ellamaria? It’s a nice name.”

“Yes, that’s my name, but—”

“So it is your seat, and it does have your name on it.” He actually bows to her and then just tilts his head toward me before heading to the back.

I can’t help glancing over my shoulder to watch him go. Hmm. That was gentlemanly and a bit flirtatious too.

Toward Ellamaria.

A pang hits my chest, my stomach tightens, and I don’t know why.

Ellamaria claims her seat and leans over. “Tell me about him.”

“There’s nothing to tell. Or maybe you have something to share?”

“No. No, he’s not interested in me.”

I nod. “Sure. ‘So it is your seat, and it does have your name on it.’”

Ellamaria roars with laughter. “You sounded just like him! How did you get your voice so low?”

I shrug. “‘You can sit there. It’s not like it has my name on it,” I parrot in a perfect mimicry of her voice.

“You never told me you could do impersonations before!” She gapes at me. “Wait. Is that how I really sound? Do it again.” She taps on the shoulder of the girl next to her. “Listen to this.”

But before I can do the impersonation again, Professor Narcissa finally comes in, and I breathe a sigh of relief.

Predator instinct is something a lot of werewolves wrestle with. Yes, we have a wolf inside of us, but to unlike the killer instinct, to know when to unleash it, to know how to control it and wrestle back to sanity… It’s not easy for some. For others, it’s downright impossible.

And then there’s me. I mastered my predator instinct when I was three. A grizzly bear came at me when my dad and I had been out for a camping trip. I’m not sure where Dad was, but the grizzly came at me. I had no choice but to turn into my wolf. Of course, I was only a cub then, and grizzlies don’t need to be provoked to attack. The bear came at me, and I snarled back, swatting, ready to bite her, to claw her, to jump at her. Anything really. I wanted to fight, to survive. A bear wasn’t going to bring me down.

It's only now, as I sit here, hoping Professor Narcissa won't call on me, that I wonder if my dad guided the bear to me. He hadn't been surprised at all when I excitedly told him about the three claw marks I cut into the bear's snout.

Honestly, I’m not even sure why the grizzly turned away after I sliced her. She should’ve attacked me. One swipe from her massive paw would’ve sent me flying, but away she went.

Come to think of it, Dad’s nose had been a bit red. I thought maybe he was so proud of me that he was trying not to cry. When Mom cries, her face gets all red and blotchy. My face takes after hers, unfortunately, which is why no one ever sees me cry. I just don’t produce tears. Not anymore.

Tears are for the weak.

And I know that some claim to cry when they feel joy… Yeah. I don't think so. I've felt joy before, and it's never moved me to tears. I don't need to cry for any reason, good or bad.

I don’t even cry from pain.

And I’ve felt pain to the point that lesser men and women would’ve not only cried.

They would've died.

"Bellanore," Professor Narcissa says suddenly.

"Yes?"

"Why don't you explain to the class why it's so important to allow predator instinct to take over?"

"Sometimes, when you're fighting for your life, you need to use all of the knowledge of your wolf. All predators react to trouble, to conflicts, to fights in the same manner. They have survived because of their instincts. They know when to fight, how to fight."

A murmur of agreement comes from the students around me.

"Robb Aline," the professor says sharply. "You disagree?"

"I don't."

I stiffen. That's the name of the werewolf with the haunting glowing eyes and the scar.

As much as I don't want to admit it, he does intrigue me but only because he's a puzzle. I'm curious despite myself.

"Then why did you make a face?" Professor Narcissa asks, her tone dry.

I glance over my shoulder at Robb. He gives me a cocky smile. Oh, boy. I can't wait to hear this.

"I just think the lovely Bellanore forgot to mention one small detail."

"And what is this detail?" The professor crosses her arms.

"Our inner wolves also know when not to fight."

The professor beams. "Very good, Robb! Exactly so. Far too many think that predator instinct is only about violence and staying alive, but how can you survive if the fight is unwinnable? And not all fights are winnable. No, a great deal relies on cunning and strength, but even they can fall you if you are outnumbered or if the foe outweighs you by too large of an amount. Sometimes, the best fight is no fight at all."

"Are you saying we should use our mouths instead?" a werewolf calls out from the back.

"If by mouth you mean words, then yes," the professor says, adopting her dry tone again. "Now, we haven't yet had our first duel yet to demonstrate what you already know as far as predator instinct. For this, you must have your lives put in danger. And I mean real danger. Mortal danger. As such, I don't suspect all of you will be willing to do that—"

I shoot my hand into the air.

"Yes, Bellanore?"

"I volunteer to go first."

"Is that so?" Professor Narcissa eyes me critically, and I have the feeling she's finding me lacking. Dad looks at me that way sometimes.

The most recent occasion had been with the walking on fire bit.

As if.

I suppress a shudder. “Yes, Professor.”

“See me after class,” she says sharply. “I think… Robb will go first.”

“Looking forward to it,” he calls from the back of the class.

I jut out my jaw, aggravated that he’s going first when I wanted to, annoyed beyond belief that the professor won’t give me this. Why? Prejudice? Because I’m half-demon? Mom assured me I wouldn’t face anything of the sort from the professors, but the students on the other paw…

Impatiently, I wait for the end of class. I stand, lingering by my desk, allowing the others to go on ahead. Soon, only Ellamaria, the professor, and I remain.

Professor Narcissa glowers at Ellamaria until my friend gives me an apologetic look and then leaves the room.

“Professor, I—”

“You don’t care about my course,” she says in a sharpness that brokers no disagreements.

“I care about predator instinct.”

“You believe you’ve mastered it already.”

“I don’t believe that.”

She arches her eyebrows.

“I know that to be a fact.”

“Is that so?” Professor Narcissa shakes her head. “I don’t know if I feel comfortable putting your life in danger to the extent that would be required for your predator instinct to be fully unlocked.”

“Why not?” I demand.

“You are a capable fighter, no doubt, and you will be able to survive much and more with your own natural abilities, predator instinct aside, but—”

“My father,” I spit out. “If you think he’ll take it out on you because you push me to learn—”

“I am not afraid of your father, but I don’t know if we have the capability here to do what you need to unlock this instinct inside you.”

"So what you're saying is that you can't teach me anything. I'm not exactly in the wrong then if I were to not care about your course, as you say."

She flares her nostrils. “Consider embarking on the Grand Hunt.”

“I’ll consider it.”

“Do you even know what it entails?”

“I do. Just about the entire academy goes on a huge hunt to find something. It changes every year, and there’s a lot of backstabbing,

and a prize for the grand hunt winner, and I think students have been maimed during it or even killed."

"No. Students have never been maimed or killed during it! The professors keep a close eye on everything related to the Grand Hunt and—"

"Well, that sounds positively boring," I deadpan.

She heaves a sigh. "Bellanore, if there is anything you want to talk to me about—"

"As far as what?"

"I know that you…"

"What?" I ask.

"Some students have been trying to cause… issues."

"There haven't been any issues at all," I say, my mind returning to my dad's red nose and the comment he made about being so sure about my only being able to shapeshift into a wolf.

He was the grizzly bear.

He came at me.

A three-year-old.

I thought myself in danger, so I attacked. I didn't want to die, and I wanted to keep Dad safe if he came back. We surveyed the area before we settled there to camp. We declared it safe. I didn't want him to wander back to me and not realize the danger he would be in.

Wow.

The professor just gives me a look, but I head on out of there and almost plow into Ellamaria, who lingers just outside the door.

"What did she want?" Ellamaria asks far too loudly.

I glare at her and hurry her away. Once we're out of the professor's earshot, I open my mouth to answer her question, but my best friend cuts me off.

"And what was that with you and the new guy?" she asks. "Robb."

"There's nothing between me and the new guy."

"Really? I'm not so sure about that."

"If anything, he was flirting with you."

Ellamaria laughs. "He was teasing you."

"How can you say that?" I scoff.

"Because he never looked away from you even when he was talking to me."

"That's not true," I protest.

"How would you know? Were you staring at him?"

"No. I was barely even looking at the guy."

"Classic. Playing hard to get."

"Not at all." I roll my eyes and shake my head. "I'm not one of those girls who feels incomplete without a guy in my life. I have far more important things to worry about."

“Like what?”

“Like…”

What my dad is up to.

How I can get back in his good graces despite my not walking in fire.

Whatever my mom is up to.

“The Grand Hunt,” I finally mumble.

“Are you going to do it?” she asks.

“Why do you sound so surprised?”

“I don’t know. I just thought…”

“What? That because I have bullies and a target on my back that I should watch what I do?”

“No…”

“You think I can’t handle myself?”

She swallows hard. “Bellanore, I am not challenging you.”

I harrumph.

“In fact, I challenge you *not* to do the Grand Hunt.”

“Why?”

“Because.”

"Because, why?"

“You need to let down your long hair.”

“It is down.”

“Just go out with Robb. Just one date. See how it goes. See if you two can be together and be happy.”

“And what does that have to do with the Grand Hunt?”

“So you’ll do it?”

I snort and shake my head so hard my hair goes flying. “No. Never.”

“Why?” she asks, confused. “Why won’t you ever go out on a date? It’s not as if you’re ugly.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” I say dryly.

“And other guys have asked you out, but you turn them all down. Why?”

“I just don’t want to.”

“No one’s caught your eye?”

“No one.”

Ellamaria falls silent until we enter the dining area. It’s in a huge courtyard of a castle with benches and picnic tables everywhere. Under a canopy is a smorgasbord of food with a ton of options.

Soon, we claim our normal table, my back resting against a tree, the perfect vantage point to ensure no unwanted persons head our way without my seeing their approach.

“It’s not that I think you have to date a guy to have worth,” Ellamaria suddenly says, breaking our silence. “You’ve been a little

distant lately. You don't seem happy. I just thought that since I'm failing you—"

"You aren't failing me! Don't be ridiculous."

"You don't seem happy," she repeats.

I bite my lower lip.

"Is it because of your classes?"

"No."

"Your parents?"

"Maybe."

"I'm sorry," she murmurs. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"No, but we can talk about a guy for you. How about Wyatt? Maybe you can get him off my back. Or maybe you should try for Robb."

"No way. No girl is going to catch his eye when you're around."

I roll my eyes. "There's Pablo."

"Pablo Starfell? No."

"Why not?"

"He… He doesn't seem happy here either."

I shrug and rattle off a bunch of names. Ellamaria shoots them all down for one reason or another until finally, she holds up her hands.

"I surrender!" She giggles. "I won't ask you about Robb anymore. How about we talk about compass sense. I had to do this one task for class and…"

She excitedly shares the story, and I'm so proud of how great she's doing. She's thriving here.

And why wouldn't she be? She has her family behind her. Her entire pack wants her to succeed.

As for me, I feel utterly alone. My pack doesn't want me because I opted to be my dad's daughter, and even he is keeping things from me. He wants me to do something I can't possibly do. Walking through flames…

I shudder and touch the inside of my left elbow. Ellamaria has gone to get us more drink refills, so she won't notice the small burn mark there. No one knows I have it.

When I was five, I saw my dad walk through flames. I was mesmerized by the sight, amazed at his awesome power, awestruck by his might. All I have to do is close my eyes, and I can smell the fire. Dad didn't burn. There wasn't the sickening scent of burning flesh or hair.

To be like him in a small way, I took a candle to the kitchen table and lit it. My hand hovered above the flames, but I was too scared to touch the fire. When I heard footsteps, I panicked and tried to blow out the candle. Somehow, I got my arm in the pass of the flames, and I was burned.

For over two years, I suffered nightmares every night about flames devouring me to the point that even my bones and teeth turned to ashes.

No, I'm not going to walk through fire. That tiny flame burned me, and the pain still lingers to this very day.

As for the question as to why I won't date Robb or any other werewolf, it's simple really.

I won't date anyone because of my dad. He's made too many threats about any guy I might bring home, and that's one thing about my dad.

He doesn't make threats lightly.

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Chapter 11

Robb

I can't help it. I'm intrigued to no end about the so-called princess of darkness. She's a spitfire to have stood up to that crowd, and to injure Wyatt? That took guts.

But her not looking at me, her not wanting to talk to me… That stings in a way that it shouldn't. She can do whatever she wants, and I'm fairly certain she's not playing me, that it's not a game. She's not being hard to get. She doesn't want to be gotten.

Bellanore. What's her last name? What pack is she in? Who does she run with?

At dinner, I think about trying to find her, but then I spy Roald and Wyatt talking, just the two of them. None of their groupies are around, and since they seem to be ignoring Bellanore and everyone else for that matter, I leave them be.

Before I can locate Bellanore, a hand clamps on my shoulder.

I stiffen. "Nia."

She strolls around from behind me to give me a smirk. "It's far too easy to sneak up on you."

"Do I look like I'm frightened?"

"No, but I would watch your back if I were you."

"My back is just fine."

"As fine as that scar on your face?" She smirks.

"Go talk to someone who cares about what you have to say."

"Oh, ho. Turning nasty on me, are you? I don't buy your whole act," she says, waving her hand. "You said you kept me from killing that vampire because you had to save a werewolf. Which one again?"

"Look, Nia—"

"You don't want war with the vampires. Why is that? You the runt of a litter or what?"

I stiffen. "You better watch it."

"Watch what? My tongue?" She sticks it out and curls it. "My tongue is just fine. I'm also watching your back."

"To figure out the perfect spot for you to knife me?" I ask.

“You’re worried about me? Good. You should be.”

“Nia, you don’t scare me.”

Her eyes narrow, and she slowly nods her head. “You don’t. I can tell, but here’s the thing, Aline. You will.”

I don’t like the idea of her walking away from me, but she eyes the two would-be alphas, waves them away as if they aren’t worth her time, grabs a plate and some food, cutting in line to do so, and then she leaves the courtyard entirely.

“She’s too much of a loose cannon if you ask me,” a werewolf with brown hair and eyes says.

I nod and suppress a shudder. “I don’t really think it’s a good idea for her to be here.”

“Why’s that?”

“She’s liable to hurt or kill someone if she knows how to use her powers fully.”

He slowly nods. “You’re probably right. Forgive me. I don’t think we formally met before. I’m Bermon Von Hagen.”

“Robb. Robb Aline.”

We shake hands.

“Are you friends with her?” Bermon asks.

“Didn’t I just say that I think she should get kicked out?” I point out.

“True. I just thought I saw you two hanging out.”

“Her friends seem to have taken it upon themselves to, ah, adopt me. I don’t care for the lot of them.”

“Then ignore them.”

“Do you know Roald?”

Bermon nods. “He’s not… We don’t exactly share philosophies.”

I burst out laughing. “Roald doesn’t have any philosophies to share.”

Bermon's smile is weak, tiny. "He likes power, craves it, but he's weak. I think that's why he wants power so much. Deep down, he knows his own limitations, but he thinks that if he acts tough, he'll become tough without realizing just how damaging he actually is."

“You have him pegged well.”

“I try to be an optimist,” Bermon says slowly. “If you can understand a person’s point of view, it’s easier to understand why they do this or that. You can predict almost how they’ll react to a given situation.”

“Interesting.”

“It’s how peace can be kept.”

And in that one sentence, I know exactly who Bermon is.

He’s a peacemaker.

He longs for peace.

Between all werewolves? All packs? Does he want the packs to all congeal under one massive pack, a pack to unite us all? There are some who feel that way, and that is one thought that almost strikes fear into the heart of me. The idea of the wrong alpha leading every werewolf who lives is terrifying.

If I could feel terror.

But there's no way that would ever happen. That would require the alpha of all alphas to get all of the other alphas to agree to him—or her—forever. Every choice would be dependent on the will of one single alpha, and that would be terrible. Not all packs are led by good and benevolent alphas as it is. All it would take is for the wrong one to ascend to the position of alpha, and all of the werewolves could be led to a path of destruction and even self-annihilation.

Such as war with the vampires on a much grander scale than just one academy versus another.

My gaze shifts over the crowd, and I eye Bellanore. She's talking to her friend, Ellamaria, the one who took my seat. I didn't want to move or give up the seat, but clearly, Bellanore wanted nothing to do with me.

The princess of darkness.

I eye Bermon. He has a faint smile on his lips that I don't understand.

"Who is she?" I ask.

"Bellanore?"

I nod.

"She is—" Buzzing sounds, and he grimaces as he grabs his cell phone from his pocket. "It's Mercy. I should take this. Normally, she texts, so if she's calling…"

I smile and nod again as Bermon rushes away. I don't know who Mercy is. There are so many here who I still don't know.

So many who won't mourn me when I'm gone.

A girl with a pouty face and narrowed eyes march over to me. "Why are you worried about who Bellanore is? She's not worth your time."

"Is that right?" I ask, bored.

"Yeah."

I glance at the girl. I think she might've been in that crowd around Bellanore. "Think I heard her called the princess of darkness. That right?"

"It is."

"And just what is so dark about her?"

"It's not the good kind of dark, not the edgy kind." She does some kind of awkward move that might be an attempt to be sexy, but it just looks super awkward. "It's the pure dark kind." She shudders.

“I don’t understand.”

“Duh! She’s half-demon. Her dad is a demon. And my friends and I, we’re all so brave to be willing to put her into her place because if her dad ever found out…”

“Hmm. Her dad’s a demon…” I glance back over my shoulder at Bellanore.

Darkness.

Princess.

Curse.

I’m sure this girl didn’t mean to, but she just made Bellanore even more interesting to me now.

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Chapter 12

Bellanore

That night, Ellamaria tries to get me to come out with her and a few of the others. They want to run around as wolves and pretend that they can do whatever they want. It's free, but it's not, not really. We can only run in certain areas on the campus, and it makes me feel like we're imprisoned. Not that this is remotely like Magical Prison, of course, but it just feels so… strange. When I'm outside of these grounds, when I'm with the pack…

I'm never with the pack.

I'm all alone.

By myself.

That fact is bothering me more and more, and I find myself turning on my computer and going to supes.com, the internet that the supernatural community uses that no humans can ever learn even exists. As much as I try to find any hint or whereabouts concerning Draz the imp, I can't. It's almost as if he doesn't exist, but that's impossible. I know the imp. I met him myself. Somehow, though, it doesn't surprise me that there's no knowledge of one of Dad's associates. On a hunch, I look up my dad, but there's actually more about him than I would've thought. Uh. That's surprising. Or maybe not. Maybe Dad just makes certain that only what he wishes to be out in the open about him is available. Yes, that makes a lot more sense.

Of course, now that I'm down this rabbit hole, I read up everything I can about my dad, but there's nothing valuable or noteworthy. I know every detail listed, and there's no mention at all of his work, although there are numerous mentions concerning his great wealth.

Greed. Isn't that such a demonic thing? Yes, my dad is greedy, but it's not as if he's the kind to rob banks. He doesn't need human money.

What does he need? What does he want?

What was the object, the certain item Draz was to procure for my dad? And why had Dad been so cagey about it? Clearly, he's up to something that he doesn't want me to know about, something no-

good, no doubt. I mean, I understand that he's a demon. He's not going to play by the rules. He's going to get what he wants one way or another. Surely Draz realizes that? So why try to act like it's impossible to get?

Even though I probably saved Draz's life, he still feared my dad too much to tell me anything specific. Which I understand, but it also vexes me terribly. I have no way to get in contact with the imp. Then again, do I really think he'll be more forthcoming during a second meeting?

No. A demon has his tongue, and that's far worse than a cat having it.

I scowl and opt to go to bed early for the night, but I toss and turn, taking hours to fall asleep, and then when I do sleep, I constantly wake up. By the time it's nearly dawn, I fling my blankets aside. I don't want to stay in that terrible place, that nonsensical land where you're trying desperately to sleep, but sleep eludes you at every turn. It's worse than a prison. I've fought insomnia on and off for years, and staying awake longer out of bed doesn't help to make the sleep come any faster that night. If anything, it means I get even less time to rest even if I can't actually sleep.

I dress in my uniform and then head outside. Classes won't start for three hours yet. That's how early I've risen, and I head to the southernmost point of the campus. I found a small spot there that no one else seems to know about. There are rocks all about near a cave that somehow has moss growing inside like a green carpet.

That's where I head, walking about halfway there before I become too impatient for my own good, and I teleport the rest of the way. Once there, I examine the moss. It'll burn for a good while, I suppose, and it stretches back about maybe a quarter-mile. A long, even stretch. Here, all alone, without my father or any others to witness, maybe I can try again.

Try to face my fear.

Try to temper down my fright.

Try to see if I can harness the demon inside of me so that I can do what seems impossible.

Walk through fire unscathed.

I'll burn. I'll become scarred, my skin melted and deformed, disfigured. I can't do this.

Dad can. He has who knows how many times.

Fire doesn't hurt him.

Is that the case with all demons? I don't know. After all, not all demons have the same powers. Magic can manifest in mysterious ways. Even witches don't all have the same kind of magic.

But this isn't really magic. It's an ability. Either you have it, or you don't.

My fingers rub along my small burn mark. I burned once. What makes me think I won't burn again?

But I don't want to have this wildfire inside me anymore.

This isn't the first time Dad seems to know more about me than he should. I've wondered from time to time if he can read my mind. Or else he read my diary. I don't keep one anymore just because I thought he might've read it, but then another occasion, he knew something no one else did.

Maybe he can infiltrate my dreams.

If that's the case, I'm going to have to see if I can befriend a fairy. I know for a fact that fairies can do that. Oikeiosis, dream infiltration. It's a scary thought, that when you are sleeping and at your most vulnerable, when your body can't be protected, that your mind can be assaulted too. That's what dream infiltration is—an assault on the mind. Even if some claim to do it to help stop nightmares or to induce a specific dream, it remains manipulation nonetheless. Of course, if one asks for the nightmares to be stripped, the intrusion is then welcomed, but any intrusion on my mind or thoughts when I'm awake or dreaming is not welcomed in the slightest. Just my concern alone about this means that I must learn how to defend my mind.

Hmm. Now that I think of it, vampires can compel people, can coerce them into doing this or that, saying this or that, obeying their every command. It works on humans, without a doubt, but I suppose it might work on a few paranormal creatures too. The thought sickens me. There are some who think that all vampires, even those bitten and thus without a demon for a father, are demonic. Maybe that's true. Maybe not. I don't know, but I don't see vampires very often. Maybe I should get to know Romelia. We are related, after all. Distantly or not, she is blood, and blood should be thick.

How thick is my dad's?

My body trembles as I reach into my cardigan pocket and remove a matchbox. It takes no time at all for the spark to catch the moss on fire, and the flames eagerly spread, slowly covering the entire carpet of moss before me like a fiery path.

I take a few steps forward so that I stand at the edge of the fire. The heat burns me from where I stand, the smoke bothering my eyes, and I fight back a cough. My lungs feel as if they're filling with the fire itself, and I have to back away. I can't even lift one foot over the flames, even though the fire isn't even licking that high. It would only touch my feet. It's not as if the fire is all around me. It's not hellfire, and it's not like the flames are rising above my head.

I should be able to try. Dad wants me to, and he thinks I can. He's never tried to push me to do something I couldn't eventually do.

But I have failed before many times before I could master the

abilities. Teleporting took me so long to be able to master that I thought I would never be able to.

The longer I stare at the fire, the more my eyes burn. I don't know if that's from the smoke or from the sting of my failure. Not even lift a foot. I couldn't take a step, but not even being willing to lift a foot screams of how much of a coward I am.

A terribly pathetic one.

Maybe Dad will abandon me too, like Mom did.

The thought has me so frustrated that I teleport to the bathroom back in the castle I live in on campus. I retrieve a bucket and then teleport to the pond on campus. Once the bucket is filled, I teleport myself and the bucket to the cave and douse the water. It takes a total of eight trips to put out the fire. Good. If it required a ninth trek, I wouldn't have been able to do it. I can't even teleport to the bathroom to return the bucket.

Exhaustion has me staggering out of there. The last trek to the pond, I almost fell into the waters because I was barely hanging on then, but I did see that despite my proximity to the fire, I don't have any soot or ashes on me. Bonus, I guess? I'm not one to look for silver linings much, usually.

I leave the cave, opting to abandon the bucket. I'll retrieve it later, when I feel up to it.

My feet drag me up a hill, and I'm a bit shocked to see someone heading my way.

"I thought I smelled the stench of teleportation," Robb says with a wide grin.

I grunt. "You can't smell teleportation."

"No? You so sure about that?"

"I am sure," I retort.

"Just because I can't teleport doesn't mean I know nothing about it," he protests.

"You can teleport. Go make friends with a fairy," I retort.

"Let me guess. You want me to go do that so you can be alone? Teleport away from you?" He peers at me closely. "You aren't teleporting anywhere."

As if on cue, I sway a bit. He goes to grab me, but the glower I give him has him backing up a step. I can't help the smile that curls my lips.

"I don't need help." I lift my chin and have to fight another wave of dizziness. Sitting down right about now might be a good idea.

"You need some nourishment," Robb declares.

He's not wrong. Because my insomnia has been so terrible lately, the chances I'll be able to sleep aren't very high. Food is the next best thing when it comes to being able to recover as quickly as possible.

Robb glances at the horizon. “We have time,” he muses.

“Time for what?”

“Breakfast.”

“Of course. We don’t have that far to walk to—”

“Not walk. Drive.”

I lift my eyebrows.

“You need real food, not the stuff they serve here. Let me take you to a place.”

I hesitate. “I don’t think—”

“Don’t think. Don’t worry. You need food. I got you.”

“You don’t have me. You don’t have anything.”

“No friends, no Bellanore, nothing at all. I do have a car, though, and I also have the address of a great place. Trust me.”

“I don’t.”

He tilts his head to the side and shrugs. His eyes close for a second, and I realize the scar is along his eyelid, not just above and below his eye. He’s lucky he didn’t lose his eye in the attack. Is he violent? I mean, people don’t generally have scars like that unless they’re in a fight, and yeah, sure, it’s possible to be dragged into a fight, but only if you’ve set foot on the battlefield first.

Plus, his friends are warming up to my bullies. The first two weeks of the school year, it seemed like the two groups would go to war with each other. Then, they just dropped it, opting to ignore each other, and the bullies took up their bone with me.

I don’t know. They pick on me, yes, but I fight back. Is it fair to call them bullies when I stand up for myself? Usually, the victims of bullies just quietly accept the abuse.

Robb opens his eyes, and his lips curl into a relaxed smirk and then a crooked smile that would make most girls’ hearts race.

Not mine, though.

“Like what you see?”

Just to irritate him, I stare at his scar, this time meaning to whereas that first time we met, it had been more accidental.

His crooked smile just grows. He knows exactly what I’m doing, and he’s not rising to my bait. What is up with him?

“Come on, Bellanore. What’s the harm in letting me take you off campus so you can get a bite to eat? The worst thing that can happen is that we arrive back a little late. Professor Rockhound will be furious, so maybe I'll just skip, but you… you seem like the goody-two-shoes type. I'm sure the professor will apologize to you for starting the class when you weren't there."

“You don’t know me at all.”

“No? So surprise me and yourself by saying yes. You won’t regret it. Besides,” he says, drawing away from me, “I don’t think you can

walk all the way to the courtyard to eat without falling down. You wouldn't want anyone else to see you like this."

"I don't—"

He holds up his hands. "I'm sure you wish no one saw you like this, not even me, but that's what chance decreed, so let it be. Come to the Cinnamon Chance with me."

"What kind of a place is that?" I ask suspiciously.

Robb winks with his non-scarred eye. "You'll just have to come with to find out."

And he starts to walk away.

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Chapter 13

Robb

I take all of two steps before I hear Bellanore huff a sigh behind me, and I fight back a grin. She's a fighter, high-spirited, and she has more than enough life for the both of us even if she is half-dead on her feet.

My pace slows so I can walk beside her without her feeling like I'm taking extreme measures for her sake because I just know she won't appreciate that. She's easy enough to read, and I can tell that her initial dislike of me hasn't worn off as mine has her. There's something about her that either draws people to her or against her. She's polarizing, and I know why I'm drawn to her and why the likes of Roald and Wyatt are opposed to her. They see her as a threat.

She? She just might be my ticket to salvation.

And it has nothing to do with wanting a kiss or true love or any of that garbage. Curses don't rely on any of that for them to be broken. No, curses are entities of darkness, and what does darkness crave most?

For more light to be snuffed out so there's even more darkness.

Darkness is like a cancer. It grows and grows and grows even where it's not supposed to. The darkness will be what claims me in the end. It'll be all that I will ever have once I'm dead.

I don't think anyone cursed can go to Heaven, so maybe I'll be bound to Hell.

Or maybe those who are cursed end up as ghosts. I think that might be worse than going to Hell.

For now, though, I have a bit of life in me even if I'm still nearly emotionless. The smiles, the winks… It's an attempt to connect to her, to feel alive.

She stumbles and rights herself, and I pretend I didn't notice. The right choice? If she falls, I won't stop myself from helping her up. I don't want her to hurt herself just because of her pride.

My car is not a sweet ride. It's just a hunk of junk, honestly, but it gets me from point A to point B, and she hasn't failed me yet.

"Meet Lucile," I say proudly. A Honda Civic, a tiny car, nothing

special, except she's been with me for years. Long before I turned sixteen, she was mine, and yes, that does mean that I drove around before I could legally. Sometimes, you have to do what you have to do, and I don't always spend all of my time away from the eyes of prying humans. There are times when I can't just use my wolf and abandon the world to let my legs carry me to my destination.

There are times, though, more and more often of late, when I want to do just that—to turn into my wolf, to flee the world, to just run for as long as I can until I expire like that messenger back in ancient Greece who managed to deliver the news of a war ending before dying.

But I don't need to do something quite so dramatic. The curse will claim me, and I can't outrun it.

I'm doomed.

"She looks like you left her out in the rain to drown a few times."

"Yes, there's rust, and the ignition doesn't always start the first time I turn the key, but once she's going, she's good." I pat her hood before opening my door.

Bellanore hesitates. She places a hand on Lucile and walks around the front, still holding on. With a bit of a stumble, she jerks her door open, and I wince.

"Yeah, it gets stuck. I should've opened the door for you. I'm sorry."

She just sits down, and my words make her stiffen. I'm positive she's considering climbing right back out. "This isn't a good idea."

"Yeah, I'm sure you want me to walk you back to your castle because you want me to know where you live."

Bellanore snorts. "All you have to do is use your nose. You've smelled me enough to know my scent."

It's true. I do know her scent—woodsy and cinnamon. Half the reason why I thought of Cinnamon Chance is because of her scent. There's also a hint of smoke to her today that she doesn't normally have.

"I won't come to your castle unless you invite me," I promise.

"You're making yourself sound like a vampire."

I let out a laugh even though we both know that take humans have conjured about vampires needing to be invited in as nothing more than a myth.

My hand shoves the key into the ignition, but I don't turn it.

"What are you waiting for?"

Counting in my head, I exhale a breath. "You to buckle."

"You can turn the key first."

I hesitate a moment longer, still mentally counting.

"Are you that afraid I'll bail?" she asks accusingly.

Sixty-three, sixty-four, sixty-five.

I turn the key, the ignition starting, dying, and then flaring to life. A large grin sweeps across my face.

“She tends to turn on more times than not if I wait for a little over a minute after I put the key in before I turn it,” I explain. “Buckle up, though, please. I tend to drive a bit fast.”

“Like a Cullen?” She huffs and moves to buckle herself.

“Like what?”

“Do you live under a rock?” she asks curiously.

“No, but I lived in a cave for some time.”

She jerks as if stung by a bee. I’m not sure why my admission shocked her so much, but I myself am shocked.

Why am I telling her about that? It’s none of her business.

After a moment, she buckles. I did as soon as I climbed into the car. Force of habit or at least it's become a force of habit. The fifth time I drove with Lucile, when I was just ten, I hit a rock. My tire blew, and my car jerked off the road and careened down a hill. I hadn't worn a seatbelt, and I went straight through the windshield. The current windshield is actually my fourth one. I bought Lucile myself for my tenth birthday and by bought, I mean I convinced the junkyard owner not to crush her. I'd been begging him for months, and in that time, I squirreled away from other junked and abandoned cars the parts I would need if he ever did break. Turns out, I can wear just about anyone down, even Fred the Frowner as I called him behind his back.

The only time I saw him smile was when I proved him wrong and drove off with Lucile.

“Why do you want that junker for?” Fred asked. “The owner had it towed here. Didn’t come to get the plates or magnets from the back or nothing. Even he knew it was worthless. It’s not drivable.”

“It can be,” I argued stubbornly.

“Tell you what. If you can get her to drive off this lot, you can have her for your tenth birthday, but then you stay out of my hair, you hear?”

Here’s the thing. Fred’s bald.

I have stayed out of his hair, though, but I do try to swing by the junkyard every now and then and leave hard candy on his desk. One day, he’ll find gummies instead. I wonder if he knows the hard candies are from me, but I’m figuring he’s getting up there in age. Soon enough, he’ll have dentures. He won’t be able to have the hard candies anymore. Wait, are gummies a good idea with dentures? I’m not so sure about that. Oh, well. I’ll figure something out.

Or I won’t. The curse will probably land me into a grave sooner than Fred will be buried.

With a grimace, I start to drive. We're silent. My thoughts are far too dark for idle conversation, and who knows what she's thinking about, although I am curious about her reaction to my mentioning a cave. Why did that freak her out and set her on edge? Does it have anything to do with the scent of smoke that clings to her like a second skin?

I subtly crack the windows, no more than an inch. Any lower, and they tend to get stuck. The back window on the passenger side can't go down at all, or else it'll slip off its track and go all the way down, and it's a pain to get it back up again. Best to leave it up forever and ever.

Yes, Lucile is wounded, a driving disaster, but she's mine. I'm not even sure what year she is. That doesn't matter. Oh, and the odometer doesn't go up anymore, so it says that she's permanently at one-hundred thousand and eighty-two miles. I've put a ton more miles on her, though, so who knows? She might've crossed two-hundred thousand at some point.

The Cinnamon Chance is a small hole in the wall, a junker by the looks of it, but Bellanore says nothing. Her face is really pale, paler than normal, and She seems to have to almost swing to gain momentum to be able to propel herself out of Lucile. She's too proud for me to make the mistake of offering her assistance, but I do hold the door open for her.

"This had better be good," she mumbles as she passes me.

She hesitates by the door, and I almost place a hand on the small of her back before pointing to the nearest booth. The place is dead, but it only just seems that way. The Cinnamon Chance is all about privacy, and the moment we sit in the booth, curtains close, and I can just hear the faint whine of the mechanism that moves us down so that the first booth is always empty.

A moment later, a fairy comes in. With purple hair in a mohawk on one side of her head, the other half shaved, she's a stunner.

"Well, I'll be, if it isn't Robb Aline." She puts her hands on her hips and does a cocky move with her head.

"Rhonda Rainbow, where's the rainbow?"

She rolls her eyes. "I got too tired of it."

"Of what?" Bellanore asks.

"Oh, hi. I'm Rhonda." The fairy reaches over and grabs Bellanore's hand for a vigorous shake. "My hair used to be all the colors, galaxy style, you know? But not with any of the colors of the rainbow. Off colors like turquoise and lilac and whatnot. Black, white, silver… But even so, everyone called it rainbow for my last name. Hello! Not rainbow colored!" She shrugs. "It got irritating."

I can't help laughing.

“Shut it, you,” Rhonda says sharply.

Bellanore glances from the fairy to me, her eyebrows raised.

“I told her not to dye her hair like that, to do two colors at most, but no, Rhonda knew best.”

“Who knew I should take fashion sense from a mauled werewolf?” Rhonda shrugs again. “So, what can I get you?”

I just laugh, and she winks. “I mean drinks.”

“Water will be fine,” Bellanore murmurs, but she seems confused.

“Water’s fine for me too.”

Rhonda winks at me and then Bellanore and flies off.

“I don’t understand what just happened,” Bellanore mutters to herself. “You two seem close.”

“We’re just friends. She has a steady boyfriend for about five months now.”

“Five months isn’t all that long.”

“Most guys don’t last longer than two months with her.”

“She gets bored of them easily?”

“You got it.”

Rhonda appears with our drinks and plates. Mine contains some kind of pastry-type thing, whereas there's a massive muffin on Bellanore's plate.

“We, ah…” Bellanore’s confusion is back in full force.

“You’ve never been here before!” Rhonda exclaims, clapping her hands together. “And I didn’t do the whole spiel. I’m sorry. I’m blaming this on Robb, though. He so should have told you already. Anyhow, here at Cinnamon Chance, you get to take a chance on whatever the cook feels like whipping up. Our chef is known for using cinnamon in every dish, and there’s even a chance that you might get a little extra magical kick in your food.” She giggles and then sighs. “Rufus is in an eh mood today, so I wouldn’t have high hopes for a boost, but he knows better than to slip anything not too nice in any of the meals because of that one incident.”

“Wait. I didn’t hear about this,” I cut in.

“Rufus’ girlfriend broke up with him, and we told him not to come in, to take some time off, but he wouldn’t listen. He wanted the distraction, but the customers claimed that they couldn’t stop crying, that they had the uncontrollable urge to fight with their significant others… We pay more attention to his moods now to make sure nothing like that happens for business. Some of those people have never come back again.” She shakes her head before beaming. “Enjoy!”

And she dashes off. Fairies. They’re so… flighty.

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Chapter 14

Robb

I watch Bellanore with interest to see what she thinks of her breakfast. She eyes her plate with skepticism and possibly disappointment.

"I just get a muffin?" she grumbles.

"I would offer to switch, but the meals are made special for us."

"How so?"

"Rhonda or whichever fairy tends to the customers tells Rufus about us, what we are, our appearance, our demeanor, our attitude, that kind of thing."

"She reads us and relays to him, and he makes us something based on that?" she assumes.

"You got it. Don't worry. It's always excellent, magical boost or not."

Bellanore breaks off a crumb and tosses it into her mouth.

"Well?"

"Cinnamony." She chews a bit more, and her face changes drastically, her color returning.

"How do you feel?" I ask cautiously.

"I think it's healing me more than just nourishing me. I feel better."

"You teleported too far away?" I guess.

She hesitates. "Too many times."

Hmm. I wonder who she was visiting.

I try my pastry. Whatever it is, it's delicious, and we take our time, enjoying the meal, and when Rhonda returns with the check, I grab it.

"I'll pay."

"I can pay for me," Bellanore protests.

"Nonsense. I drove. I suggested the place. It's a date. I'm paying."

"Whoa, hold up there, bucko. Who said this is a date?"

"I did. Actually, you want to stay and have dessert? It's always incredible here."

"No. No, I don't want dessert, and this isn't a date," she scoffs.

"Fine. This isn't a date, but you will date me," I insist.

“Not on your life,” she retorts.

I wince at that particular phrasing, but she doesn’t seem to notice.

She removes her wallet and places a few coins on the table. “And for what it’s worth…” She pushes up the cuff of her cardigan, stares at her watch, winces, and stands. “We’ve been here far too long. I’m going to—”

I grab her arm before she can teleport away. “Why won’t you date me? Is it because of your dad?”

Her eyes widen, and she sits back down. “If you must know… No, it’s not because of my dad.”

"Then, why?"

She blows out a breath and stares at me. “It’s because I can’t trust you.”

“Why not?” I demand. “What have I done that’s so untrustworthy?”

“You won’t tell the truth,” she mumbles.

“About?”

“Your scar.”

I make a face. “You haven’t even asked me a question about my scar. You’re just making an assumption, and you know what happens when you assume.”

“It makes an ass out of you and ‘mption,” she says with a slight smile.

“Very cute.” I eye her and cross my arms.

Rhoda comes back and notices that there’s not enough money on the table. She turns to me, hands on hips again. It’s her favorite pose, I swear it is.

“We’ll have dessert,” I tell her sweetly.

Her eyes light up. "Oh, really?" She actually hops away.

Bellanore drums her fingers on the table, but I hold up a finger. A moment later, two plates appear on the table, which has been cleared off except for the bill and Bellanore's coins. Two napkins appear. Two forks. And then another plate perfectly between us of puffy dough pillows smothered in butter and dipped in cinnamon sugar.

Honestly, I don’t know why we were given forks because there aren’t any knives, so I just nod for her to pick one up. She does, and a dust trail of cinnamon sugar falls back onto the plate. Quickly, she brings it over to her plate, and she leans over to take a bite. More dust falls, and it coats her lips as she chews. Her eyes close briefly, and the smile on her face is perfect.

Something almost burns in my chest. I’m not sure what it is, but it’s gone a second later.

“Are you going to ask your question now?” I inquire.

“No. We can enjoy dessert first,” she says eagerly. Then, she gives

me a shy smile. “I’ve never had dessert after breakfast before.”

“At a place like this, it’s more than acceptable.”

“Oh, yes!”

So we enjoy our delicious dessert, although I find myself watching her more than I eat. Once she realizes that she’s indulged more than I have, her cheeks turn pink, but I just laugh and let her have the last one.

Once she finishes, she uses her napkin to wipe off her mouth, a regular Miss Manners. Then, she clears her throat. “So, Robb, you’re right. I assumed you wouldn’t want to talk about your scar and how you got it because you were so miffed that I accidentally—”

“You did not accidentally stare at it,” I claim.

“I didn’t mean to stare,” she protests. There’s a hint of honesty to her tone.

And that’s when I opt to tell her the truth. As we ate dessert, I wrestled with myself, going back and forth. Already, I leaned on the side of telling her, but now, there’s no mistaking what I’m about to say.

“It’s all right. I get it a lot.”

“No, it’s clearly not all right, and it shouldn’t be. It’s very personal, and—”

“A drow did it,” I interrupt.

“A dark elf?” she asks, her eyes widening in shock.

“I know. Not very highbrow of them, right?”

“Why? Why would you fight a dark elf?” She leans forward, elbows on the table, her chin in her hands. It’s a perfect picture of inquisitiveness and marvel. She looks spellbound.

And if I’m not careful, maybe I’ll become spellbound. I love the way she’s looking at me with interest.

But no. It’s not love. That feeling is shut off to me. I’m merely feeding off her emotion because I can’t feel any of my own.

“I fought the dark elf because he…”

“What did he do?”

“He killed someone I loved,” I say.

It’s the truth, yes, but not all of it.

“Who?” she asks softly.

“My father.”

“Robb, I’m so sorry.”

“My father, my mother, my brother. My friends,” I continue, but even that isn’t all of it.

“Robb!” Her hands cover her mouth. She mumbles something, but I don’t catch it.

“So, yes, I provoked the attack. I went after him, and he gave me this.” I close my wounded eye, essentially winking at her.

“Did you kill him?” she asks roughly. “I would’ve.”

“I did.”

Bellanore nods, and that’s it. She doesn’t judge me, doesn’t condemn me for killing someone. She just leaves it be.

And my esteem of her rises even more.

We pay, and I drive us back to campus. Our conversation is lighthearted, and she’s witty and charming, but then, I shouldn’t be surprised. Most demons are charming and persuasive. That’s how they’re able to draw in their prey, how they make blood pacts and other deals signed in blood, how they can acquire souls.

When I park, I turn to her. “Can I kiss you?” I ask, surprising myself with the bold question.

Bellanore giggles.

“Is that a yes?” I lean over toward her.

She places a hand on my chest. “Slow your roll, Romeo. Maybe one day.”

“One day?”

“After a real date.”

“That mean I get a yes for a date then?” I ask.

“I suppose so. That’s your win for the morning.”

“I’ll take it.”

“Good, because that’s all you’re getting.”

“Maybe it’s all I need.”

“Hmm.” A slow smile curls her lips. “I had a good morning,” she says softly.

“I did too. The first in a long while.”

She bites her lower lip as if wrestling with herself before blurting out, “You don’t have to hang out with them, you know.”

“And you don’t have to antagonize them either,” I point out.

“Touché, but it’s a matter of pride.”

“You part lion?”

“Maybe.” She shrugs.

“No, there’s no maybe about it. You’re definitely a lioness. That’s why you don’t’ let them get to you.”

“They get to me some.”

“Don’t let them win.”

“I’m trying not to. Most days, they don’t. Not that they come after me every day, but…”

I want to talk to her about her dad, about his being a demon. I need a foot into that dark world where demons live, and I don’t mean Hell. I mean on Earth, but it’s been a good morning, and this conversation is already turning a little darker than I would like.

“If they give you a hard time,” I start.

“They can say what they want, call me what they want—”

“Princess of Light.”

She rolls her eyes. “I knew you overheard them.”

“Princess of Sunshine?”

“No.”

“Rainbows?”

“No, and if you say unicorns next, I’m going to use a claw to stab you as if it’s a horn.”

“Princess of Enchantments.”

Her mouth hangs open.

“You like?” I ask smugly.

“It’s better,” she admits. “Not quite right, though.”

“I’ll come up with something.”

“You should be more worried about how you’re going to make up missing class with Professor Rockhound.”

“He isn’t on my radar. I’ll come up with the perfect nickname for you.”

She glances off, staring into the distance. “Princess of Darkness might not be that far off,” she mumbles.

“Light and dark,” I say softly, touching a few strands of her black and white hair.

The look she gives me lacks a smile, but it's tender, too tender almost. She blinks and looks away, and the moment passes. A wave, and she teleports away.

Somehow, someway, I find it in me to smile.

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Chapter 15

Bellanore

After such a large breakfast, I'm not hungry for lunch, which is almost over by the time I teleport to the castle that houses the professors' offices. I duck inside, and I head to find the professor of the class I missed—compass sense.

Professor Gremma is in her office, heading out as I approach. She eyes me, and she shakes her head.

"I know you're disappointed with me," I blurt out, "but—"

"You have a reason to excuse your absence?"

"Of course I have a reason. It's not one you'll find satisfactory."

She snorts. "I don't suppose I will."

I heave a sigh and then throw up my hands. "I don't mean to insult you or the school by saying this, but compass sense… For me, it's a waste of time."

"Is that so?" she asks dryly as she crosses her hands.

I gulp. I'm digging myself a grave, but I can't stop myself from nodding.

"Very well. Come see me tonight north of the Pendes Wood. Stroke of midnight. I will transport you somewhere with you blindfolded and given wolfsbane. You will have to return to the campus within one hour without teleportation. If you can do that—"

"I have to be tortured?" I blurt out.

"If you can do that," she repeats, "you will be given an A and can either take another course in its place or have time for independent study. Do we have an accord?"

"We do."

We shake, and I nod to her solemnly before teleporting away so she wouldn't see that I'm grinning like a fool.

My next two classes are perfectly fine. Robb sits in the back, but the tilt of the head he gives me is more than enough to make me smile. Ellamaria drags me out of the classroom the moment class is finished, so I can't talk to him any, and she drags me along to dinner.

"Where were you this morning? You had me so worried! I couldn't

find you for breakfast, and then you skipped class! I know you're a half-demon and all, but normally, you're conscientious."

I just grin. "I was busy."

My best friend appraises me critically. "Busy?"

"Yep!"

"Doing what exactly?" she asks suspiciously.

"Sometimes, we just have to… take life by the horns, you know? We have to be go-getters. We need to do whatever is necessary. I needed a recharge, and I got it."

"Who are you, and what have you done with my best friend?"

I laugh, and then I do something I haven't done in a long time. I start to hum.

I used to hum all the time when I was little. It used to give my dad headaches for whatever reason. Or maybe he just used the headaches as an excuse, but I stopped humming. But the reason behind the humming had always been because I was very, very happy.

"I'm pleased you're happy," she says slowly, with just a hint of skepticism, "but why are you so happy? Don't get me wrong. It really does make me happy that you're happy, but…"

"You want to know why I'm happy."

"Yes! Don't keep secrets from me."

"Well… maybe I found a werewolf after all."

"Seriously? Who?"

I bite my lower lip and glance around. I don't see Robb anywhere, but I mean, we've only just started whatever this is. If I weren't so pigheaded, we would've already gone out on a date this morning, but there will be a real one.

My grin is slow to form, and my heart feels light. He told me the truth about his scar. Not that I thought he would lie to me. I also felt such an incredible sense of sadness and pain from him. Yes, he hangs out with a rough crowd, and yes, there's a shadow of darkness that lingers over him, but he's fighting some personal, emotional demons, and I want to help him. I think I can help him.

If anyone knows how to fight against and prevail against the darkness, I do.

"Robb."

"The new guy?" Ellamaria shrieks. "Did I tell you, or did I tell you?"

"Harrumph!"

The harsh noise captures my attention, and I glance over my shoulder.

"Gayle, did I tell you that I broke up with Jett?" Mindy asks loudly. She's purposely not looking in my direction, but I somehow get the feeling she's directing this at me.

“You did? Why? You were gone over him.”

“Oh, well, he broke up with me, actually, and I need someone to help me feel better. Maybe Robb can help me out. What do you think? He’s so good-looking, striking, those amazing eyes…”

I just smile and wave at Mindy, completely unfazed.

The wave diverts Mindy’s attention to me. When we make eye contact, she narrows her eyes and looks around wildly. Suddenly, she stomps off, and I realize Robb is here after all. Mindy’s heading right for him, and—surprise, surprise—Robb is with the rough crowd.

Even more amused to see how this will turn out, I stand to get a better view. Mindy shoves Jett aside, and she grabs Robb’s arm. He goes to shake her off, but Mindy’s not that easily broken. She tries to kiss him, but he smoothly sidesteps her and walks my way.

Ellamaria heaves a dreamy sigh as Robb crosses over to me.

“Want to leave this place?” he asks.

“Hmm.” I tap a finger to my cheek. “Maybe. Do you trust me?”

His eyes glow a bit brighter than normal. “Yes.”

I hold out my hand, and he takes it without hesitation.

Even though I’ve never teleported with another person before, I attempt to right now.

It’s not nearly as easy to do this, but my body is humming from whatever was in the muffin. Definitely a kick to something, and maybe it’s a bit of a gamble to eat there because what if something doesn’t sit well with you? What if it doesn’t help but hurts someone? But then, you are taking a chance, right? That’s the whole point.

Besides, how epic had that departure been? I just wish I could’ve seen Mindy’s face, but I’m sure Ellamaria will tell me all about it later.

When we come out of the teleportation, we arrive in a tree. More specifically, in a treehouse. Even more specifically, a terribly unstable treehouse.

A terribly unstable treehouse that breaks from our weight.

We’ve only just teleported into the treehouse when we’re already falling.

Robb lands on his feet, and he goes to catch me, but I land on my feet too.

“I can take care of myself.”

“Clearly.” He winks at me. “Not the jealous type, huh?”

“Jealousy is for the insecure.”

“You most definitely are not insecure. You’re too much of a badass for that.”

"I don't know if I would call myself a badass, considering there are students who attend here who hate me no matter what I do or say. Then again, I don't really try to make nice with them either, so I guess I'm encouraging their hatred."

“If they have hate in their hearts, that’s on them.”

“Yes, but that’s sort of a demonic thing, isn’t it? To foster hatred in other people’s hearts?”

“Well, you aren’t fostering hatred in my heart.”

“Hmm. Is that right?”

“Yes. You know that.”

“Do I?”

“You should.”

I bite my lower lip and then shake my head. “You do know why they can’t stand me, right?”

“If you’re wondering if I know that your dad is a demon, yes, I do know that.”

“And you don’t care? That doesn’t change your opinion of me?”

“Let’s see. Do I want to date your dad or you?”

“Me.”

“So how does he enter the equation?”

“Oh, if you’re serious about dating me, if we become serious, you will meet him, and you’ll need to be ready.”

“Are you threatening me on behalf of your dad?”

“Does that alarm you?”

“No. If you’re trying to scare me off, you’re failing.”

“I’m not sure my dad will like you.”

“Again, if you’re trying to scare me off—”

“I just want you to know what you’re getting into.”

“You should be careful.”

His warning makes me smile. It should frighten me. It should give me pause or even a chill down my spine, but I’m not worried at all, and I don’t know why.

“I’m always careful,” I tell him.

“Hmm. Why do I doubt that?”

I give him a half-smile. “You should never doubt me.”

“Oh, I’ll never underestimate you.”

“Not the same thing and you know it.”

“Your dad wouldn’t do anything to you, would he?”

The question is highly personal, very intrusive, and this I do care about.

“If you think my dad will do anything to put me at risk… you’re right, but it’s only because he wants to push me and train me.” I wait, watching carefully to see how he’ll react to the notion that I’m actively learning how to use my demonic abilities.

“It must be wonderful to learn from your dad,” he says.

And I don’t detect a hint of a lie.

Tears prickle at my eyes. I’m not one to cry, but that simple sentence makes me remember that Robb has lost so many people in

his life. His parents, a brother…

"Do you want to talk about your parents? About your brother? What was his name? Was he older than you? Younger?"

"I'll tell you about them," he promises, "but not right now. Right now, I want to know what else your dad has taught you because teleportation is a neat trick."

"Well, that's one of the first abilities that I've mastered. Although, I can only just now say that I've mastered it."

He narrows his eyes. "You never teleported someone else with you before, have you?"

"No. I have other objects in addition to my clothes of course."

He blinks a few times.

"Yes," I mumble, "if you must know, the first few times I attempted teleportation, I tried to go from my bedroom to my bathroom without any clothes on. It requires more attention, more focus, more magic to be able to teleport anything with you, and that includes clothes. Obviously, Dad wasn't in either room at the time. He had to shout from downstairs to give me directions."

"I'm sure your mom loved that."

I hang my head.

"What is it?"

"Your mom… What was she like?"

"Like you. Strong, brave, true. Why?"

"Let's just say that I wish your mom lived instead of mine."

Robb takes a step back.

It's a terrible statement, what I just said, but I can't take it back, and I won't either. My mom has abandoned me. She's turned most of the pack against me. Most. Not all. I don't feel like a lone wolf, and my body doesn't entirely act as if I'm without a pack. Lone wolves aren't long for the world.

Robb might have lost his family, but he still has his pack. He's not alone.

I reach out my hand, and he takes it.

"I'm sorry for your losses," I murmur.

"I'm sorry you don't have a mom who respects you for who you are."

It's such an honest moment between us, and I know I'm going to fall hard for Robb Aline if I let myself.

And I just might let myself do exactly that.

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Chapter 16

Robb

I squeeze Bellanore's hand. "You still haven't said what else you can do. Like I said, teleportation is amazing." I wag a finger at her with my free hand. "So long as you don't push yourself too hard."

"You can always take me back to Cinnamon Chance afterward." She lifts her chin, looking both proud and stubborn, so her question that follows surprises me. "Have you ever dated someone who wasn't a werewolf?"

"I haven't been on a lot of dates, actually, and are you asking because of Rhonda? We're just friends. We'll only ever be friends. She's too…"

"Flighty?"

"Exactly!"

We both laugh.

"So you aren't jealous of Mindy, but you're jealous of Rhonda?"

"I'm not jealous," she protests. "That's for people who are insecure."

"You aren't insecure."

"Not even a little bit. I know you like me."

"The whole asking you out thing gave that away, huh?"

She gives me a half-smile that lights up her glowing eyes. I don't know. I might like this half-smile more than her full one.

"You are very easy to read, Robb Aline."

A shiver runs down my spine as she says my name. I don't know why that affects me, but it does.

"How about you prove how secure you are in our relationship by letting me kiss you?"

Bellanore laughs and releases my hand. "I don't think so. I won't kiss without a real date, remember?"

"You could just retract what you said, and Cinnamon Chance could count as our first date." I flash a grin. "I'll pay you back if that's an issue."

"It is not an issue, and that wasn't a date. That was a chance for us

to get to know each other."

"So you took a chance on me at Chance?" My grin is even bigger now.

"Yes."

"And you won."

"Or maybe you won," she counters.

Her fire is so fun.

"We both won, wouldn't you say?" I lean down, trying to steal a kiss, and she laughs, pushing me away.

"Keep this up, Robb, and I'll leave you here."

"You would abandon me?" My voice hitches slightly on *abandon*.

For a second, she looks grief-stricken. "I'll never abandon you, Robb, but don't read too much into that. I'll never abandon any of my friends. I won't leave you."

Like your family left you.

The unspoken words are so easy to read in her eyes, and I have to look away. She doesn't know the true extent of my loss, but she knows the part that hurts me the most.

"Rickard," I mumble.

"Hmm?"

"Since you keep neglecting to tell me what else you can do, I'll answer one of your questions. My brother's name. Rickard."

"That's a nice name," she says softly.

"He was younger than me by five years. My parents tried to have more pups, both before Rickard was born and after, but… Wasn't meant to be."

"Robb…"

I turn aside, wanting to turn my back to her. Somehow, we're becoming too close too quickly, and she's getting me to talk more than I ever intended to. Maybe demons have silver tongues, the art of persuasion, to compel people to answer questions, and I fought it until the magic overwhelmed me. I don't know, but how can she touch me so deeply? This shouldn't be happening.

"Can you change the subject now?" I ask bitterly. "Maybe answer my question?"

"Of course," she murmurs, her voice as soft as her touch. "Pain transference. I can transfer pain from one to another. If I'm hurting, I can give it to someone else. I can take your pain and give it to someone else. If someone chops down a tree's branch, I can transfer the tree's pain to a person. Any pain, too, not just physical pain."

Bellanore walks around and lifts my chin, forcing me to look at her. "You're hurting, and that hurts me, but I can take away some of your—"

"No." I take her hand by the wrist and lower it. "Thank you, but

no."

"You're a martyr?" she asks dryly. "You don't have to be a badass with me. You can let down your guard. I'm sorry I forced you to tell me about your scar. As glad as I am that you let me in and told me, it wasn't my place to ask that of you or to insinuate that I wouldn't go out with you unless you told me. I just… I wanted us to be friends first, before we consider dating, and I thought you might share that knowledge with your friends, but you don't, do you? You keep that tight to you, and maybe I shouldn't have offered to take your pain away, and that martyr bit, that was cruel, and—"

"And you do know how to breathe, don't you?" I ask lightly with a small grin. "You asked about the scar. It was my choice whether or not to tell you. You didn't force me too, and that martyr bit? Completely fine. You were teasing me, and I found it amusing, as you intended. Stop second-guessing yourself."

"I still shouldn't have asked you in the first place."

"You shouldn't feel as if you need to be careful with what you say to me. I don't want there to be anything between us."

As soon as the words leave my mouth, I gape at her.

I mean it. I meant every word.

As much as I want her to trust me, though, as much as I want to trust her, I can't tell her about the curse. Not now.

But soon.

Soon. Very soon. If not, I'll never be able to tell her because I'll be dead.

"But if you feel guilty about your prying question and your forward offer, there is a way you can make it up to me." I throw her a wink.

She rolls her eyes and crosses her arms. "You aren't getting a kiss from me that easily."

"Have you been kissed?" I ask on a hunch.

"Not on the lips," she admits. "You?"

"Same, actually."

She blinks a few times.

"I'm not lying," I say.

"I know you aren't."

I stare at her. She said something similar to that before. Just like that, I know another one of her demonic abilities. She's an empath. She can read another's emotions, maybe their thoughts to some extent. She can sense if they're telling the truth or not.

"But it is unbelievable, isn't it?" I ask, mockingly putting on airs. "Since I'm so hot and all of that."

She just gives me a long look that says volumes before she steps forward and kisses my cheek. Before I can say anything about her

starting to cave, she takes my hand and transports us back to Moonstone Academy grounds.

Teleportation is weird. It feels like I'm being yanked out of my body and then returned to it, only I'm standing somewhere else a millisecond from the first place. It's disorientating, and each time, I think I might vomit, but I've managed not to each time. Hopefully, that feeling will wane in time.

In time.

That's a luxury I don't have.

"It's getting late. I have some work to do, and you should maybe be early to your first class so you can get whatever punishment Professor Rockhound will dish out done and over with sooner rather than later."

"Thanks for reminding me," I groan.

She wiggles her fingers in a small wave, and she's gone.

"Don't teleport too much!" I call even though she might not be close enough to hear me.

As I turn away, I sniff. Her scent lingers and not just because she stood before me seconds ago.

She brought me outside the small castle she lives in.

A small smile curls my lips. She wanted me to know where she lives.

With a chuckle, I shove my hands into my pockets and head to my own castle. Most of the time, I don't bother to sleep in my bed. I prefer to sleep out of doors, under the moon. Who knows how many more times I'll be able to see her shining face?

In the end, that's what I opt to do. Sleeping outside brings me a little more comfort than being inside a stuffy castle with werewolves I don't know and don't care to know. That right there highlights the curse all the more.

I've lost my pack.

And I can't have another one.

Lone wolves…

~

I'm in a field with wolfsbane all around me. I can't breathe. My wolf tries to jump, to race through the field to reach one of the towering trees in the distance. Each step has agony searing through my entire body, and I think I'm going to collapse, to fall down, to die, but I refuse to stop fighting. I refuse to lie down and die.

I'm fighting.

Why am I fighting? This pain isn't worth it.

But I want to live.

Why?

What do I have to live for?

Finally, somehow, despite it feeling like my paws are going to fall off, as if there is a fire burning me from the inside out, I reach the nearest tree.

The branches are too high up, and my claws? They're all dulled down to nubs. They hardly count as claws, and I can't get any purchase on the trunk.

The wolfsbane, the pain, the agony…

I'm dying.

I wake, but my heart isn't pounding, and I feel no fear. I also feel no relief that the nightmare is over.

Because it's not over. While I might not be trapped in a field covered in wolfsbane, I'm still dying.

A cough sounds from behind me, and I sit up on the grass. I don't have to sniff or look over to know who is there.

"Tran," I say.

"Are you making any progress?"

I wince. "I think so."

"You better start thinking faster, pup. You're going to be in for it if you don't get a move on."

"I know," I mumble. "I'll get it done."

"If you don't…"

"I said I'll get it done!"

"I heard you, but your actions… They leave a lot to be desired."

I close my eyes. The moon is still in the sky, hanging low. I've slept for a few hours, but dawn is still not yet here.

"Are you trying to tell me that you're spying on me?" I demand as I open my eyes.

Tran eyes me. The imp is perfectly visible despite the darkness around us. I chose a spot beneath a tall, bushy evergreen so that I would have a fair amount of shade, yet I can still watch the moon's gradual descent.

His eyes are black and gold, inhuman, and he watches me a moment longer. "You've been warned."

"I didn't need a warning," I spit out. "I know what's on the line."

"I don't think you understand the importance of this," Tran presses.

For once, I hear an undercurrent of fear and worry in his voice. This imp isn't like any other imp I've ever seen. He doesn't make jokes, do pranks, or any of that. He's not a trickster. Why he's so devoid of emotion, I'm not sure. Maybe it's from hanging around demons too much. That has got to suck the life out of you. Apparently, the emotions too.

“That demon… if he lives… what’s been seen… I know you’re doing this for the curse, but you have to do this for the world.”

I howl with laughter. “For the world? You do realize I’m doing all of this *for* a demon? A demon who probably isn’t any better than that demon? None of them are good.”

“Some are worse—”

“Lesser of two evils,” I say idly. “Are you serious? That cannot be your argument.”

“It can, and it is.”

“Begone, imp,” I snarl, curling back my upper lip.

And just like that, the imp is gone.

I exhale and wearily drag a hand down my face. I don’t need Tran or anyone else to tell me what I already know.

My wolf is dying.

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Chapter 17

Bellanore

For a few days now, the bullies have left me be. Even Mindy hasn't tried anything with Robb after that first attempt, and maybe there's a rift between my bullies and the rough crowd because they aren't hanging out all together.

Speaking of not hanging out all together, Robb and I have talked a fair amount during our class together, but the rest of the time we spend apart, which is fine by me. I don't need to be around a guy all the time. We haven't figured out a time and date for our date yet, mostly because Professor Rockhound really has it out for Robb, and Robb has to go wallcrawling for four hours every night. He's walking around like he's dead, and I don't know how he's able to handle it all, honestly.

"I still can't believe you lucked out of taking compass sense," Ellamaria complains as we're eating dinner.

"Do you think you can do what I did?"

"No," she admits.

"Then, you need the course."

"Yes, but…" She glances around and then leans in close. "How did you do it?"

"Do what? Know where to go to return home?"

"Yeah." She grimaces. "You didn't cheat and use your demon powers any, did you? You're too good at being a werewolf already. It's not fair. You're only half-werewolf!"

"Or maybe I'm one hundred percent werewolf and one hundred percent demon. Ever think of that?"

"But that's two hundred percent," she protests.

I wink. "I'm just that awesome."

"You forgot humble too."

"Yes, humble… What else?"

Ellamaria smirks. "Has great taste in friends."

"Naturally."

"But not boyfriends."

I eye her suspiciously. “Why do you say that?”

“Well, why is he over there, sitting with Roald and his groupies? Why isn’t Robb over here with you? I can make myself scarce. I do have other friends.”

“You do?” I gasp. “No way. Unreal. I can’t believe it.”

She heaves a sigh and holds up a hand. “I’m serious. I don’t have a good feeling about Robb and the company he keeps.”

“I’m not worried about it.”

“Why? How can that possibly be a good idea?”

“You don’t know Robb.”

“And you do? Has he taken you to meet his family yet? To see his alpha?”

I scowl. “We haven’t gone on one date yet, and you think I should meet his alpha? By the moon, you’ll have us getting married before another complete lunar cycle!”

“I don’t want you to rush things,” she protests. “I just don’t know anything about the Aline pack.”

“So?”

“Do you?” She gives me a look.

“Ellamaria—”

“I know you try to see the good in everyone, but not everyone is good. Come on, Bellanore.”

“What?” I ask, exasperated. “I should know that more than anyone, right? Is that what you were about to say?”

She glances away, her jaw set.

“There are things you don’t know about Robb, things I don’t feel comfortable sharing because they’re personal details that only he should say or not say. Can’t you trust me?”

“The whole point is that I do trust you. The one I don’t trust is Robb!”

“You saw the way he handled things with Mindy when she threw herself at him! What more do you want from the guy?”

“Wanting him to not be involved in a bad pack—”

“What Roald has isn’t a pack,” I snap.

“What do you even know about packs anyhow?” Ellamaria spits out.

“What did you just say to me?” I ask quietly.

She stays silent.

“What was that supposed to imply?” I demand, my tone sharper, maybe too sharp.

Ellamaria must realize she’s gone too far, but I can’t. I can’t handle this. I won’t.

“That’s a stab at me because my pack doesn’t want anything to do with me because of my dad, and here, I thought that you of all people

would never do that. You know how much it hurts me that my own mom turned her back on me, that she's turned the pack against me. It eats me up inside, but thanks for mentioning that."

Ellamaria opens her mouth, but it's as if she set off a short fuse because I've started now, and I don't think I can stop.

"And you can't talk to me about relationships, Ellamaria. You haven't dated a guy before. You haven't even been kissed on the cheek, have you? Not even that! But you're giving me dating advice? Seriously? You don't want me to be with the guy because of who he shares a few meals with, but you want me to meet his alpha which is something only super serious couples do. I'm sixteen. Sixteen! That's far too young to settle down. Who knows if Robb and I will last? But why can't you be happy that I'm happy?"

"I was. I am!"

"No, you were right the first time. You *were* happy for me. Now you aren't. Why not? What changed?"

She shakes her head. "No. You aren't going to act like this is all on me. I have your best interests at heart—"

"You don't know what my best interests are!"

"Don't I? Bellanore, I've been by your side for years. You can't tell me that I don't know you. We've been inseparable. No one's been in your corner longer than I have. No one. Not… Not your dad. No one."

Bitter tears sting my eyes. "When's the last time you saw my mom?"

"Bellanore…"

"When's the last time you saw her?" I spit out.

"You told me you would never ask—"

"I need to know."

Ellamaria closes her eyes.

"Answer me."

"Like I told you. You try to see the good in everyone, but—"

"Not everyone," I growl. "I know not everyone is good. Just look at my parents. Neither of them is going to win any parenting awards. I've been abandoned, and I… My dad is probably involved in something nefarious. I just… I want to know what my mom's been up to while she's been away."

Ellamaria's eyes flutter open and closed several times.

"Just spit it out!" I grind out through gritted teeth.

"You don't want to know," she murmurs.

"I wouldn't have asked more than once if I didn't," I argue. "You don't know what I want and what I don't want."

"I'm telling you you don't want to know."

"Ellamaria!"

"Last weekend."

“Last weekend. You saw my mom last weekend.”

Ellamaria still won’t meet my eyes, and I don’t have to use any demonic awareness to know she’s hiding something from me.

“You saw her during what? A gathering of the pack?”

“Not the entire pack,” she says slowly.

“Who? For what purpose?”

“Most of the females. For Christine. She’s pregnant. It was for a baby shower.”

I'm dumbstruck. I honestly feel as if she struck me hard in the gut.

“Christine’s pregnant? And you didn’t tell me? Why not?”

“I tried, but Christine… She…”

“She didn’t want me there?”

“More like she wanted your mom there, and she knew it was one or the other.”

“Why did she want my mom there over me?”

Ellamaria closes her eyes.

“Because Chrissy always called my mom auntie.”

Chrissy’s the name Christine went by for a long while until she became too mature for it. To call her that now is a bit of a dig, but I don’t care.

“Let me guess,” I continue. “I was the only female in the pack to not be invited.”

Ellamaria nods.

“Did you even mention me to your sister?”

“I did, but it was her call.”

“And when it’s your turn to marry, your turn to have pups, will I be there? Or will I continue to be ostracized?”

“You know I don’t care who your dad is,” she protests.

"But you are convinced that Robb is hanging out with the wrong sort of crowd, so I shouldn't be with him even though talking to him makes me happy. You think he's not good because of the people he associates with, but have you noticed how little he says when he's around them?"

“No, I don’t stalk your boyfriend. I don’t stare at him every chance I get.”

I scowl. “He’s not one of them.”

“Are you so sure about that? You don’t spend enough time with him.”

“You can give me as much grief as you want, but you can’t say anything bad about him.”

“I can, and I have.”

“You think Robb isn’t good for me,” I say slowly even though I’m repeating myself. “You think he’s a bad influence. You think he’s going to do what exactly? Bring out my demon side more? Is that

what has you worried? You claim you don't care who my dad is, but that's your worry, isn't it?"

“No,” she protests.

“Be careful,” I say darkly. “I can tell when people lie.”

Her eyes narrow, and her fingers turn to claws.

“How cute,” I snap. “I’m the half-demon, but I have more control than you do. Maybe Robb has some of that too, and he won’t ever become like those he sits with.”

“But people become who they interact with. People change, and they—”

“Are you saying I changed?” I ask coldly.

"Yes, but you aren't the only one to have changed. I've changed too."

I nod slowly. “Is this it, then? Are we not friends anymore?”

“Bellanore, you have to stop. There’s no reason to go to the extremes. Yes, we’re fighting, but I…” She throws her hands up. “I never would’ve ever thought that we would fight over a guy, and it’s not even as if I like the guy too. You can have him if only he were a good guy.”

“What has he done that’s so terrible?”

“His associates—”

“My mom abandoned me, yet you still spend time with her,” I say bitterly. “Should I think the worst of you because of that?”

“That wouldn’t be right,” Ellamaria protests.

“Right or not, you’re judging Robb.”

"So, that gives you the right to judge me?"

I point at her. "So, you do admit that you're judging him."

“I’m worried about you!”

“Because you’re questioning my judgment.”

Ellamaria glances away.

“You think I can’t think clearly, but do you think that because there’s a boy involved? Or do you think that because of what I am? Do you judge me for being a half-demon? Maybe you just hide it better than the others.”

“You’ve never been a half-demon to me,” Ellamaria murmurs. “You’ve only ever been my friend.”

I shake my head. “That’s just it, Ellamaria. What you and the others all don’t understand is that I’ve embraced who I am. I’m a werewolf, and I’m a demon, and if you can’t handle that, then I don’t know what to tell you.”

“When is the last time we’ve fought?” Ellamaria asks, her tone pleading. “We hardly ever fight. We’re almost always on the same wavelength.”

“Not this time,” I say coolly.

Ellamaria glares at me. A muscle in her jaw twitches, and then she stands. She shakes a finger at me, but then she just cocks her head to the side, turns around, and storms off.

And all I can hear in the back of my mind is Ellamaria saying, “You try to see the good in everyone, but not everyone is good.”

Only this time, I think she’s talking about me.

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Chapter 18

Robb

I'm as close to feeling afraid as I can.

Not because my wolf is dying.

Not because *I* am dying.

Because I don't want anyone to know.

But I'm also as close to feeling selfish as I can too.

Above all else, I don't want Bellanore to realize I'm dying, but I also don't want to stop spending time with her.

Selfish. Because if she grows to care for me only for me to die… Can there be anything more cruel when I know there's no end to the curse? I can't hope to break it. I am doomed.

Not only that, I can't help but notice that Bellanore is sitting alone at dinner. I often find myself watching her during meals. We haven't shared one since Cinnamon Crunch. I'm almost dead on my feet because of my punishment. Professor Rockhound is running me into the ground. He's going to be the case of my dying earlier than the curse would've have called for, and I have no one to blame but myself.

It was worth it.

I don't think I would have minded if the meal at Cinnamon Crunch had been my last.

So why am I not bothering to sit with Bellanore for every meal?

Because I've intruded into her life too much as it is.

Because I'm trying not to be selfish or as selfish as I can be.

And because when I first started to head over to eat with her, the rough crowd started to follow, and I didn't know how they would react to her. Roald and Wyatt are butting heads again. I swear, if they were bucks, their antlers would be all stuck together, interlocked.

I haven't sat with her to protect her.

Besides, I don't want to keep her from her friends. She'll need them when I'm gone.

Only now, Ellamaria is nowhere to be found.

Before I can think better of it, I stand.

Roald immediately eyes me.

“I’m off.”

“Where to?”

I grit my teeth. I’m not going to allow him to act as if he can dictate my every move. He's not my alpha, so there's no reason for him to know my every move. My whereabouts aren't his concern.

“I’m blowing this joint.”

Roald burls back his upper lip, not liking that at all, but I don’t care. I curl mine right back, but I can feel it. I’m drained. My muscles are going to start to go away, and I’m going to rot until I’m nothing more than skin and bones, and then, I’ll just be bones buried somewhere, and that’s it.

Thankfully, Wyatt walks on by, and Roald realizes too. As soon as Roald’s gaze shifts to the other werewolf, I’m out of there and gunning for Bellanore.

She doesn’t even look up as I approach, and I claim the seat that had been Ellamaria’s.

Only now does she look up, and she doesn’t smile. She doesn’t react at all except to stare at me. More like stare through me.

I tilt my head to the side, appraising her. Normally, her face is so very easy to read, but it’s entirely devoid of emotion right now.

She looks how I feel all the time.

I clear my throat and cough into my fist. “Bellanore, maybe tomorrow, we can finally have our date. I think Professor Rockhound is going to end my punishment, and—”

“I can’t.”

“Not tomorrow night. Not the night after either, I’m guessing. Is that a never? Did I do something wrong?”

“No, you don’t understand.” She looks away, off to the side. “Ellamaria and I had a fight. I said something I shouldn’t have.”

“Why were you fighting? You two are like sisters.”

"You don't even know how close we are. Born less than a half-hour apart in the same pack…"

“You two don’t have the same last name, though.”

“I took my dad’s last name.” Bellanore bites her lower lip and grimaces. “I don’t want to get into that, but Ellamaria and I, we did grow up super close, and she should know me better than anyone, but I feel that she doesn’t trust me. She doesn’t think I know what I’m doing. I swear she thinks that I’m being reckless and clueless, but she doesn’t know everything. How can she? I won’t tell her…”

Bellanore eyes me and shrugs.

“You fought about what specifically?” I ask even though it’s fairly clear that they fought about me in some capacity.

“Ellamaria doesn’t like that you eat meals with and spend time around Roald and his group.”

“I’m not friends with Roald or any of them.”

“No? Then why do you hang out with them?”

“It’s complicated.”

“Complicated?” She gives me the most exasperated look ever. “How about you explain that? Or are you back to not giving any details? Because that’s as good as lying.”

“I don’t abide by what they do,” I say.

“And just what exactly do you not abide?”

I grit my teeth. “You want to tar and feather me because they won’t leave me be?”

“They seem to be leaving you be right now, aren’t they?”

“Because Roald and Wyatt are at it again. Don’t ask me why. I’m not their keepers.” I tap a finger to my chin. “I have the strangest feeling of déjà vu. Didn’t we talk about this before? I thought you understood—”

“What did they do that you don’t abide? If you won’t tell me, that’s as good as lying.”

“Fine. You want to know what happened? I’ll tell you, but, ah, there’s no one who can confirm this.”

Her eyes narrow, and I wince.

“Fine. Nia can, but don’t ask her. She’s… She’s worse than Roald.”

After a moment, she nods for me to continue.

“They went to the Blood Moon Ball. Er, the Red Moon Ball. Whatever it’s called.”

“Blood Haven?”

I nod.

“What happened?”

I blow out a breath. “What do you think happened when werewolves showed up there? There was a fight, and I stopped… I stopped Nia from killing a vampire, and I claimed that it was to save a werewolf. I’m not even sure who I said.”

“That’s the thing with lies. It’s not worth telling them.”

“Yeah, well, sometimes you need to because she would’ve turned on me.”

Slowly, Bellanore reaches out, holding out her hand. It’s a peace offering.

“There’s just one thing I don’t understand. You said that no one but Nia can collaborate your story. Why is that?”

“Do you know about haze avitores?”

“Yes,” she says slowly. “You brought them to a party?”

"I bring them everywhere."

“Uh, you realize that’s not normal, right?”

“Princess, I’m not normal.”

She flinches.

“You don’t like that nickname? Do you prefer 'Queen'?"

“And what would I be a queen of exactly?”

“Anything you want.”

Her smile is slow to grow but stretches across her face, and—surprise, surprise—it’s contagious. I’m smiling back before I even realize what I’m doing.

“I’m no queen,” she says softly. “Maybe Princess of Darkness does fit.”

“If it fits, own it.”

Her smile fades some. “I really want to make things right with Ellamaria.”

“I’m sorry I was the cause of your argument. Do you want me to talk to her?”

She tilts her head to the side. “Maybe we could both talk to her.”

“I’m more than willing to do anything to help.”

Bellanore makes a cute face and shrugs. “Maybe if you can help make things right, maybe we will go on that date.”

“Whatever will make you happy.”

“What about you?” she asks me. “What will make you happy?”

I gape at her. She’ll know if I’m lying, but I can’t. I can’t be happy.

Deciding to take a leaf out of a fairy’s book—a wing might be better—I finally say, “All that matters is your happiness.”

“That’s not true at all,” she protests. “Your happiness—”

“—hinges upon yours.”

She eyes me skeptically. “You know… You could’ve saved me from all of this if you would’ve just eaten with us.”

“And made her a third wheel?”

“There’s no reason why others can’t get to know you. The real you.”

“No one wants to know the real me.”

“Why? Because you allowed yourself to, what, be more animalistic? To be so-called dark like a fairy can be light or dark? Trust me, Robb, you don’t have to complete any penance.”

I blink a few times.

“Yes,” she says, answering my unspoken question. “I do think you’re punishing yourself. You’re trying to keep Roald and the others in check. That’s why you went with them to the ball. You’ve said so many times that you aren’t their keeper, but that’s exactly what you’re doing. You’re trying to make this campus safer for us all. You’re a good man, Robb. Don’t sell yourself short.”

“I killed—”

“You had no choice.”

“There’s always a choice.” I wrinkle my nose and fight back a sneer. “There’s almost always a choice.”

“You are a werewolf with honor, and you defended your family and friends. I don’t know why that drow killed them, but you fought him because of his actions. You were not in the wrong, and you can move forward. I know you’re trying to.”

“Oh, so you got me all figured out, have you?”

Her smile makes her eyes glow even more than normal. “Yes, I think I do. Tell me if I’m wrong.”

“You’re wrong,” I lie, just to tease her.

Her giggle has me grabbing her hand. We stand and head to that same castle she brought me to before. Still hand-in-hand, we stroll inside.

“Stay here,” Bellanore murmurs, guiding me to the parlor, but already, her friend is strolling toward us. “Oh.” She turns her head so that her lips are right up against my ear. “We fought about a lot more than just you.”

Ellamaria crosses her arms. “Oh, so Robb decides to finally pretend to be the perfect boyfriend tonight of all nights?”

“Yes,” I say, “because I’m not the perfect boyfriend, so I would have to pretend to be perfect. Actually, no. I’m not pretending to be perfect. I’m just me. I’ve made mistakes in the past, and I… I’ll probably make some more in the future.”

“We’ve all made mistakes from time to time,” Bellanore says softly. “I’m sorry about the things I said. My issues with my mom…” She rolls her eyes. “Go ahead. Say it.”

Ellamaria just shakes her head.

“Say it,” Bellanore repeats.

“I always knew you had issues,” Ellamaria murmurs.

Bellanore laughs. “What can you expect? I mean, abandonment by mom, demon dad… What’s a girl to do?”

I rub the back of my neck. “Maybe that calls for a lot of chocolate.”

Ellamaria wrinkles her nose. “Only if you want to be in Bellanore’s good graces.”

“Wait, you don’t like chocolate?”

She shakes her head.

“And you don’t know if you like me. Fair enough. You don’t know me, so how can you know?” I shrug. “I—”

“I need you to trust me about Robb,” Bellanore says desperately.

“I—”

But Bellanore won’t let me get a word in. “He’s the kind of guy who should be alpha. He stands up for his family, and he’s trying to prevent Roald from starting a war with the vampires.”

“What is she talking about?” Ellamaria asks me.

“The ball,” I mumble.

“At Blood Haven? You mean the rumors are true? Werewolves

went?”

I nod slowly. I can't help thinking about that one werewolf I saw there, the one talking to the vampire. Julian. If he did something to hurt her, it would've been the talk of the entire academy. No, I don't think he was there for nefarious purposes. Who knows? Maybe he fell for her.

I’m falling for Bellanore.

I shouldn’t, but I am.

She needs to be friends with Ellamaria again. The abandonment, her mom… Bellanore deserves so much more than I can give her.

For now, though, I can give her tonight, and I can try to help patch things up with her friend, and then… We'll just take it a week at a time, a day at a time, until I'm down to minutes.

Tran is right. Time is running out for me. There’s no way I can do what’s required of me. I might as well try to pretend to be happy during my last days.

That’s the best I’m going to get.

Bellanore and Ellamaria are laughing. I missed the joke, but I laugh anyhow, and the sound isn’t entirely fake.

Maybe, despite everything, I really am a little happy.

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Chapter 19

Robb

The punishment isn't over. Technically, Professor Rockhound wants me to continue on with the charade, but I'm done. I'm not going to waste my time doing this. It's bad enough that I'm wasting my time here at the academy at all when I'm wasting away.

Why did I even come to Moonstone Academy in the first place? To try to find a way to get close to my target, but honestly, my thoughts aren't about myself lately.

No. They're all centered on her.

She confuses me even as she coaxes smiles out of me. No one else moves me like she does, and I don't think anyone else understands me like she does. She doesn't know the entire story, even if everything I told her was true, and I can't help but appreciate that she doesn't think I'm a monster.

But if she knew the whole truth…

It's not as if I provoked the drow and that's why my entire pack is dead. No, that blame lies elsewhere, and even though the one responsible is also dead, I find no solace in that.

For me, there's no solace to be had. My life is meaningless, yet I'm striving to find a reason to continue on each day.

Why, though? For what? To what end?

I attended Moonstone Academy because I sought to end the curse, but if I truly wished to, I would already know who I have to kill. I would know where my target lives, have plans to know how best to secure the heart and brain.

Instead, I find myself infiltrating a rough crowd despite my wishes and falling for a werewolf, unlike any other and not merely because she has a demon for a father. She cares about me. She might be the only person alive who cares about me since my entire pack has been slaughtered.

Never make a deal with a drow.

Never ever make a deal with a demon.

All you'll get is misery and suffering, but then again, I can't even

feel misery and suffering. Yes, I feel the physical aches of my body from the hours of wallcrawling, but any emotions from it I don't feel.

A void. That's all I am.

Who can wish to be around a void?

If she knew, Bellanore would try to be happy enough for both of us, but that isn't how the world works.

Last night, I didn't tell Ellamaria much, just enough to get her to realize that I'm not like Roald and the others. That seems to be enough for her, especially since Bellanore pointed out that Ellamaria should know Bellanore enough to realize she is an excellent judge of character. Then, they talked about Bellanore's mom quite a bit, and I just sat there and listened.

Until Professor Rockhound hunted me down as if I'm prey, and I've been wallcrawling for so long that I think I'm going to fall down and collapse into a heap of broken bones.

I can't handle this anymore. I just can't.

But I do have something to look forward to tonight.

Bellanore and my first date.

I don't even care if the professor hunts me down. I'm not going to be on campus, and he can extend the punishment for all the good it'll do me. I'm done, for real this time.

When it's finally time for our date, I force myself to smile and not show how exhausted I am.

And then I get a good look at her.

Bellanore is wearing a dress with a black top. The skirt is the same color as her glowing green eyes, and it swirls around her legs as she leans against the doorway of her castle.

As for me, I'm just wearing black pants and a dark shirt. Nothing fancy. I'm a simple guy.

"You ready to go?" I ask.

"I suppose."

"You don't sound too enthused," I say. "Something wrong? Everything's still good between you and Ellamaria?"

"We're fine. I just… I'll tell you later. Where are we going? Cinnamon Chance again?"

"No. I have somewhere else in mind."

I take her hand, and we walk away, heading off campus.

"Why aren't we driving there?" she asks. "Or are we almost there?"

"We're going in here." I point to a dark alley.

She blinks a few times, but I grin because she doesn't question me.

As soon as the shadows touch us, I'm dropping to all fours and letting my wolf out. Bellanore does the same, and then I jerk my head to the side, and I dash away. She chases after me, and if this was a real race, she would win easily. I used to be one of the swiftest wolves

in my pack. I suppose by default, I still am, but that's not saying much. She's so much faster than I am. Hmm. If she gave it her all, would she have beaten me in my prime? Maybe.

The thought almost triggers a bout of sadness, but by now, we're passing fields and trees and heading to the spot on a small plateau. Once we climb the flat side—yes, having to wallcrawl to get to the top—we finally arrive.

There's a deer up here. I brought it here earlier, and I'm glad it never came down. I allow Bellanore the first strike, and then the second because I'm too spent to take down even the docile deer.

Together, we carve and cook the meat. Bellanore looks so lovely as the fire gives her a reddish glow.

After we've eaten a few bites, I nod to Bellanore. "What do you think?"

"A wonderful first date so far," she admits.

I beam. "This is how my dad proposed to my mom. They ran together, hunted together, ate together… And Dad asked Mom to do that with him every day for the rest of their lives. Of course, they didn't necessarily hunt every day. Some kills provided for us for much longer than one meal, but we ate mostly from the Earth."

"Let me guess. You think too many werewolves are lazy and just go to the store and by their food, don't you?" she asks.

"Well, that depends."

"On what? Oh, I know. On whether or not I buy food from a store." She howls with laughter.

I grin and shrug. "Pretty much."

"Hmm."

"So you aren't going to answer, huh? Noted."

She gives me a look, and my grin grows. "This is all very sweet of you, but you aren't planning on asking me anything, are you?"

"Don't worry. I'm not Dad, but I do think that he waited only until their third date to propose."

"You're joking, right?"

I just shake my head.

Her eyes widen. "That's really… fast."

"I guess when you know what you want in a person, it's easier to find the person that you're meant to be with."

"Do you know who you want to be with?" she asks.

"Do you?" I counter.

"For now at least, you."

I can't help smirking.

Her smile is shy, and she ducks her head. "Do you want to know about why I wasn't the happiest when you came to pick me up?"

"Yes."

“Ellamaria tried to see if she could lure my mom out so that I could see her. It’s been far too long since I last saw her.”

“It didn’t go well, I take it.”

“Actually, my mom isn’t a fool. She realized what Ellamaria was up to, and she refused to meet with her.”

“Your mom wants nothing to do with you? Why?”

“I don’t know. She hates her husband. I guess she thinks I’m no different than my dad.”

“Why did she marry him in the first place?”

Bellanore throws up her hands. “For all I know, she thinks he mesmerized her into marrying him and having me. She seems to regret everything that deals with Dad, including me. I don’t know if he did something to turn her against him or what, but…”

“I take it you haven’t talked to your dad about her.”

“No.”

I suck in a breath. “Do you talk to him often?”

“Yes. He’s training me, remember?”

“Of course. Why don’t you ask your dad about your mom?”

“I… I’m afraid. I don’t know if I want to know the truth, and also…”

“Also what?”

She shakes her head. “I’m just worried that my family is going to be blown apart entirely, and then I’ll have to pick a side, but Mom doesn’t even want me. How can I pick her? As for Dad, yes, he trains me, but I… I think he might be into something big, something dark, and I don’t want any part of that.” Bellanore lowers her head. “I want to know what he’s up to, and I don’t want to know, and it’s all very confusing.” She grimaces and rubs the back of her neck. “I’m sure you don’t want to hear about my issues with my parents, considering…”

“No. I would rather help you if I can.” I reach over and squeeze her hand. “is there a way I can help?”

“Maybe just by listening to me vent. I don’t know how to fix things with my mom because she won’t even bother to come see me, and as for my dad, I don’t know if I want to know, or if I should just leave that hornet’s nest alone. But if he is doing something that could hurt people…” She tilts her head forward, and her hair comes forward too, covering the sides of her face. “Shouldn’t I want to find out so I can stop him?”

“You aren’t your dad’s keeper.”

“No more than you are Roald’s and the others.”

I can’t help shuddering. “So far, they seem to be behaving, but I have a feeling they’re up to something.”

“Really? Like what?”

“Roald and Wyatt aren’t talking, but I saw Nia talking to Wyatt,

just the two of them."

"Maybe they're pairing up," Bellanore suggests.

"No. It wasn't nice and cozy."

Her brow furrows. "Were they fighting?"

"No. I don't know how I know this, but I think they're teaming up, and if those two do, it's not going to be good. Nia is the one to watch, not Roald."

"Wyatt is more bark than bite, I think," she murmurs. "If Nia is planning something…"

"Let's not worry about that," I say, even though I can't worry.

My thumb runs over her knuckles. She places her other hand on top, sandwiching mine between hers.

"You told me a little bit about your parents," she murmurs, "how they became engaged. You haven't told me much about your brother."

"I appreciate that you want to know more about my family, but right now…" I use my free hand to stroke her face. "Right now, I would really like for you to not be worried. You still are, aren't you?"

She considers my words and then nods.

"And you have good reason to be worried. Reasons. Your mom, your dad, Nia… I want to take your worries away."

"How do you want to do that?" she asks softly.

"Can I kiss you?"

She eyes me and opens her mouth. I'm sure she's going to reject me again, but then she just simply nods.

I close my eyes and press my lips to hers.

And at that moment, there's a spark, a faint flicker of *something* in my chest, deep in my soul.

Is she taking away some of my pain? Some of the curse? She can't!

But I'm not a strong man. I'm weak from all of the fighting to live just one more day.

So I don't cut off the kiss. If anything, I deepen it, allowing myself to feel not just her tender lips, her soft cheeks as I cup her face, but also feeling *something*.

Maybe I can fight the curse after all.

If only I didn't have to kill in order to break the curse.

A fight that will most likely end in my death even if I weren't cursed and weak to begin with.

But maybe… maybe I can learn about demons from Bellanore. I can learn about their weaknesses. I can then find the one demon I have to kill for the curse to be lifted.

But I don't want to involve her in any fashion. She's already considering getting into the crosshairs of whatever vile trap her dad is springing. She might already be in danger.

I want her safe and happy.

She needs to be reunited with her mom.
And she needs to stay away from me.
I'm a ticking time bomb, and I won't have her go down with me.

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Chapter 20

Bellanore

The kiss was sweet, short, and thankfully not slobbery. Before I left for the date, Ellamaria corrected me on one tidbit from our fight.

She kissed someone before. Pablo Starfell and Ellamaria went out for a date. Why she never told I didn't understand until she confessed that the date had been terrible and that the kiss at the end had been equally terrible. Pablo slobbered into her mouth like a, well, like a dog. I teased her that maybe all werewolves kissed like that, and she teased me right back, saying that I better expect slobber then.

But after Robb and I part ways from the date, I don't immediately head inside my castle to talk with Ellamaria. I linger to watch as Robb fades out of sight. We only had the one kiss, our goodbye sweet and tender without one, and my heart aches for him. He's been through so much already, and he's not even twenty yet. Is it possible that life can now finally give him a break? After all, he has me, but it hasn't escaped my notice at all that he bears scars—not just the physical one on his face but also the ones inside, the ones marring his soul.

Movement to the left catches my eye. Gayle is heading toward her castle. She's alone for once, and it makes me wonder if Mindy is with Jett. Unless maybe Mindy hadn't been lying about her and Jett splitting.

I'm not sure why, but I cut over and approach Gayle. She doesn't notice me until I'm almost beside her, and she jerks back, her eyes wide.

"Why are you here, Bellanore?" she asks in a hiss.

"I saw you were here, and I thought to myself why not see how you are."

"See how I am? How do you want me to be? I'm just fine. You can go now."

I narrow my eyes and cross my arms. "I don't understand why—"

"I don't care what you do and don't understand."

Miffed, I sniff, and that's when I catch a bitter scent.

She's afraid of me.

Maybe all of the bullies are. It's a sad feeling, a bit crushing really, to realize that they've been trying to hurt me and tear me down because they don't want me to have any sense of power. They don't want me to be confident because they're afraid I'll… what? Hurt them? Have I done anything to make them fear me?

I hang my head. "Gayle, I was wondering if you would like to come over. Ellamaria's probably up yet, and we can watch a movie—"

"Watch what, freak? A Halloween movie? You aren't going to go all Carrie on me."

She rushes away, no longer heading to her castle.

She's afraid. She's that terrified of me since she was with me alone.

The thought that others might actually be afraid of me never occurred to me, and it's beyond unnerving. I can understand being afraid of demons, even ones you haven't met, but to be afraid of me…

Yes, I'm a half-demon. I know that, and I've accepted that.

Maybe that acceptance makes them even more frightened of me.

But hardly anyone knows that I'm actually training and mastering all of my powers and abilities. No one has any reason to fear me.

My stomach twists into knots. I grab my hair and tug, not enough to hurt, and it doesn't serve to lessen my frustration. I glare up at the moon. Well, I would if she weren't covered in clouds.

Frustrated beyond belief, I glance around and spy another werewolf. She's also alone, and I quickly recognize her as Nia.

The one that even Robb thinks needs to be watched.

Even though it might not be a smart idea, I find myself marching over to her. She halts when she notices that I'm heading her way, and I lift my chin.

"Nia."

"Bellanore." She mimics my stance—tilted head, arms crossed, a leg jutted out to the side at an angle.

"Where do you get off?" I explode. I'm not even sure where the anger comes from, but venom drips from my words.

"Get off? Doing what?" she asks with an air of innocence that doesn't fool me for one second.

"You want war with the vampires, don't you?"

"Why wouldn't you want that? Isn't war kind of your whole thing? Being a…" She leans closer as if sharing a secret. "You know," she whispers.

I open my mouth, but she doesn't let me say anything.

She straightens and pegs me with a sardonic smirk that I want to slap off her face. "Shouldn't you hate more than any of us?"

"Oh, dear me, can you think in anything outside of clichés?" I snap. "Seriously. Just because I'm half-demon doesn't mean that I'm only capable of hate. You don't know much of anything at all, and

frankly, I'm embarrassed for you."

"Is that so?" She puts a hand on her hip. "Go ahead. Tell me more. Tell me just how embarrassing I am."

"You think that you can get away with manipulating werewolves. You have some kind of grand plan, don't you? That's why you hang around Roald. You and I both know that he's a fool—"

"Is that so? Maybe I should tell him that, or are you trying to get Wyatt off your back? Or are Wyatt and Roald back to being buddies again? Maybe you'll piss them both off in one fell swoop. Sounds about par for the course for you, doesn't it?"

I grit my teeth. "You want to use the werewolves to provoke a war with the vampires, right? That's why you…"

"Why I what? Oh." She laughs slightly. "Did Robb tell you an earful? That werewolf is pathetic. He's even more pathetic than you are. He might have a scar and look like he's a total badass, but he just looks the part. He thinks I'm a fool, that I actually believe that he was trying to save a werewolf, but no. He saved a vampire. Why would he do that? Why would he turn against his fellow werewolves? What could have been in it for him to save that vampire?"

My skin is covered in goosebumps. Something isn't right here. The look in her eye… I shouldn't have brought up anything that suggested I knew about what happened. If she's going to go after Robb now, that's on me.

"You hate vampires because you think it's innate for us to," I say, "but it's not true. It's a learned bias."

"Oh, and why are you so high and mighty about vampires? Why do you think they deserve to wander the Earth? They're abominations! They live by destroying, through destruction! They have to survive by drinking blood, and they kill."

"We kill," I counter.

"We kill animals to eat them," she argues.

"And we turn into animals."

"Just one. A wolf. The noblest of animals." She gives me a grin that shows just how high and mighty she thinks she is. "We are a part of nature, and nature provides us what we need."

"And nature provides blood for vampires."

She stares me down. "Next, you'll be telling me that demons like yourself drink blood. Is that so? Is that why you feel a certain… kinship with vampires?"

"I don't feel a kinship—"

"You shouldn't feel a kinship with any werewolves. Your own pack has turned against you, haven't they? A birdie told me that you and Ellamaria are fighting. What a shame. You know what happens to werewolves without a pack, don't you? You should. I bet you're

already starting to feel some of the side effects, and to think that the reason why the pack turned against you is because your own mother has abandoned you."

I do my best to control my face, to have a mask, to hold as still as a statue and not give anything away. Inside, though, I'm seething. I'm furious, frustrated, and flustered. I'm entirely confused.

Also, how did she manipulate this conversation to be a huge attack on me?

It's as if she's the half-demon, not me.

I lift my chin. "I don't need my mom or my dad to know right from wrong. There's no reason that vampires and werewolves can't both survive on this Earth. There's no need for war."

"Why don't you want war?" she asks.

"Why do you want it?" I counter coolly.

"Are you worried you would die and go to Hell?" Nia asks with a smirk. "Isn't that where all of you demon types go? You should feel right at home there, or are you afraid that they won't accept you either? Since you aren't exactly truly evil. You aren't evil at all. You want to know what you are, Bellanore?"

"I find it remarkable that you profess to know me at all, Nia, considering we haven't talked much at all before now."

"Ah, Bellanore." She stalks toward me, very much looking like a cat stalking a bird. Or make that a dog stalking a cat considering she is a wolf rather than anything feline.

I bristle. She's getting under my skin far more than she should, and maybe I should just walk away, but it's too late. The damage has been done. She's not going to let me have peace right now. I'm stuck.

"I know you. I've been watching. I watch all of the players here at the academy. You aren't much of one, so don't flatter yourself, but there might be some use for you yet."

"If?"

Her smirk falls into a smile that gives me chills. "If you finally accept just who and what you are."

"I've already made my peace—"

"No!" she shouts. She winces and tries again. "No, Bellanore, you haven't. You only think you have. I've seen it in the stars. You have so much potential! A demon craves violence, desires war. Chaos and anarchy are all you should want. That isn't the case, though, is it? No. You're still clinging to something. Something is holding you back. Is it approval from mommy dearest? Do you think that if you refrain from your true nature, she'll come back to you with arms wide open? She won't. You might as well be dead for all she cares. Go ahead. Try to reach out to her, this time you and not your friend."

I stiffen, and her grin only widens. How does she know all of this?

“You won’t go and see her, but you should. Er, you should try to since she won’t want to see you, but that’s neither here nor there. Go ahead. Have her tell you to your face what she thinks of you. Maybe then you can truly be the demonic werewolf we need you to be.”

“We? Why do you need a demonic werewolf?” I ask suspiciously.

She just grins at me. The glint in her eyes is terrible and wicked, and she starts to walk away.

I should let her. I wanted this conversation done and over with, but I can’t.

Quickly, I rush forward and block her, halting her retreat.

“If you think you can say a few nasty things and change who I am as a person, you can’t. You’re wrong. I am secure—”

She shoves me. “Are you?” she asks coolly. “Are you secure in who you are?”

I stare her down. “I am.”

“Harrumph.” She bumps into me as she tries to slam past me, but I grab her arm. Her gaze falls to my hand before she looks up at me. “Go ahead,” she says, her smile returning. “Deck me. Fight me. Unleash your feral wolf. Go lunar. Rip me to shreds.”

“You want to die?” I ask, hating that my teeth are aching from the desire to convert over to wolf canines.

“I want you to be free. That’s all I want for all werewolves.” She steps back, forcing me to release her arm, and she spreads out her arms as she adds, “Freedom.”

I swallow hard as she waltzes away as if she hasn’t a care in the world. That glint in her eye… She wanted me to fight her, and I think that if she thought I would fight back, she would’ve swung the first punch. She’s not thinking clearly. She can’t be. War? Why would she want a demonic werewolf to go lunar?

What is her endgame?

Do I even want to know?

Probably not.

~

After my first class, I take my time leaving. For some reason, I have a bad foreboding. Something terrible is going to happen.

Finally, I leave the classroom, and I start to head toward the lunch area when I spy two werewolves talking in hushed tones. Julian and Bermon. I don’t mean to eavesdrop, but despite their attempt to be quiet, I can’t help overhearing.

Julian shrugs. “I’m sure an angel and a demon have gotten together before.”

“And probably almost caused Hell on Earth,” Bermon says.

“Maybe, but if an angel and a demon can do it—”

"Hypothetically," Bermon stresses.

“Do you want me to see if I can learn about a couple like that?” Julian asks, reaching for his phone.

"We have a class to get to."

“I know, but…”

As Julian starts to search on his phone, he's heading right for me. I try to move out of the way, but we bump into each other.

“I’m sorry,” Julian says.

I look up at him and brush back my black hair. A few strands here and there are white.

“It’s all right, Julian. I wasn’t watching where I was going.” Not exactly the truth, but even if I have been listening to them, I’m preoccupied, concerning with that feeling of impending doom as well as that unnerving talk earlier with Nia. I tilt my head to the side. “Are you all right?”

“Are you…” He shakes his head.

I lift my eyebrows. Is he wondering about my blood? About what I am? Not everyone on campus knows who my dad is, what he is. “Am I what?”

“Related to…” He waves the hand holding his phone and almost throws it at me. It’s almost funny, but clearly, something’s going on with him. He’s worried, anxious, and I wonder if it has anything to do with him and an angel or a demon or…

A vampire.

Hmm.

“Never mind,” he mumbles.

“Are you sure you’re okay? If you have a question for me, you can ask.” And I’ll tell him the truth. There’s no point in hiding who I am.

But Julian just shakes his head, ducking around me and mumbling another apology.

That was interesting. Very interesting. But I’m not going to pry. His business is his business.

As for Nia’s, though, I have a feeling she’s up to something, and I wouldn’t doubt it at all if she’s the cause of my feeling so on edge.

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Chapter 21

Robb

“Have you had any Mystic Twilight recently?” a werewolf asks as she walks by. I’m not sure who she or who the werewolf she’s talking to is, but something makes me keep an eye on them as they walk past me toward a bench for lunch.

“No. You know my birthday isn’t for a few more months,” the second werewolf says. “Why?”

“Oh, it’s just because I saw Nia with some.”

“You did? When? Isn’t her birthday after mine?”

“Yep. Pretty sure.”

Curious, I take a few long strides to be near them and clear my throat. “Did you say Nia? Nia Forge?”

“Yes.” The first werewolf eyes me. She crosses her arms. “Who are you?”

“Robb. You?”

“Anna Snowblood.”

“Elliot,” I mumble.

“Yeah, he’s in my pack. What about him?”

I shake my head. “You saw Nia with some Mystic Twilight?” I ask.

“Yeah.”

“When?”

“Last night.”

I purse my lips. “It was dark last night.”

“So? Just because it’s a black drink doesn’t mean you can’t recognize it. One, the smell, and two, the silver ice cubes. Dead giveaway. What do you care?”

The other werewolf just stares at me, at my scar. I turn and glower at her, and she emits an “Eep!” and retreats a step.

Anna glares at me. “Don’t act all animalistic and savage toward us.”

“Don’t be near Nia. She’s…”

“She’s what?” Nia asks behind me.

I grit my teeth and turn around. I can hear the other two scamper

off, which is probably for the best.

There's a gleam in her eyes, but I don't think it's from Mystic Twilight. It's a potent drink that werewolves use. It gives us increased power and strength, both ourselves and our wolves. Some abuse the drink, and it can cause a host of various health ailments and conditions, and serious abuse can result in death.

Legally, werewolves are allowed to drink Mystic Twilight once a year on our birthdays. That's it. I don't even bother then, but actually, now that I think about it, maybe the drink could help to give me time.

Time to what? Break the curse? Even at full strength and vigor, I couldn't succeed.

I'm as good as dead. Walking dead. I'm hardly alive.

Yet, I'm not ready to stop fighting Nia.

"You've been drinking Mystic Twilight, huh?" I ask her.

"You don't need to worry about me."

"No?"

"No. I wasn't the one who did it."

"Did what?" I ask suspiciously.

"So you don't know everything that happens. Good. I can be the one to tell you."

"Tell me what?" I ask, curling my upper lip.

"There was an attack at Blood Haven earlier today."

"An attack? Was someone—"

"Hurt? Killed? Who cares if one of those bloodsuckers are dead? Vampires are monsters. They dare to think we are because we have a wolf inside of us, but we evolved. We used to eat flesh and drink blood, but we don't anymore."

She pauses and licks her lips, and it's just enough to make me wonder if she actually does drink blood. But where would she get it? No, she's just trying to make me think that. With Nia, you can't take things at face value. She's toying with me, messing with me, trying to get me to run around in circles, chasing my own tail.

I say nothing, and Nia doesn't take long to break the silence.

"Fine. I'll tell you. From what I hear, someone went to Blood Haven and attacked a statue. A solid steel statute."

"A statue?" I repeat, my heart sinking.

A warning.

A promise of violence.

Nearly a declaration of war.

"Yes. From what I hear, there's a statue there, might even be in the center of their campus. It's a vampire with its head back, so its stupid fangs are visible. There's a moon above the head like some kind of dark, twisted halo, and there's a victim dead at its feet. So morbid, right?"

I say nothing.

Nia doesn't seem to care that I'm unresponsive. "Yes, so morbid. Anyhow, the head was cut off, the vampire beheaded, and the fangs were cut off, and there are now claw marks on the chest and neck. A huge improvement, I'm sure."

"But you didn't do this."

"You think I did?" she asks innocently, a hand to her chest. "Why, Robb, who do you take me for?"

"If not you, then who? And what's all this about the Mystic Twilight?"

"Robb, the statue was solid steel. Even werewolves can't easily claw through that. Not without a little… kick."

My mind races. There have to be other werewolves who hate vampires. Most likely, the vast majority feel the same way Nia does. Nia, Roald, and all of them. It sickens me that they would tar all of the vampires with the same feather.

Defang them all with the same pliers more like.

"You supplied someone with the Mystic Twilight, didn't you?" I accuse.

"Robb, what does it matter? It's over and done with."

I narrow my eyes. "Is it?"

"I swear to the moon, you act as if you care more about the bloodsuckers than you do werewolves. Are you one of us or one of them? They won't hesitate to kill you, to drink your blood—"

"Do they drink werewolf blood?"

"Maybe for you, they'll make an exception."

She's cold, ice cold. It makes me wonder just how much she can feel. There's something utterly chilling about her. The disregard for life that she has, the ability to use others for her gain…

Nia can never be made alpha. Her followers would do everything she asked without question, and they would not just kill for her. They would murder for her.

I swallow hard. Maybe my last days should be spent taking her down instead of long hours with Bellanore.

One grants me a semblance of happiness.

The other grants me a chance to actually make a difference in the world.

Don't I owe that to the Alines? The ones who had been murdered? The ones without a chance to live, to love, to take a breath?

Nia's not a loose cannon. She's too cool to be so hotheaded, but that doesn't mean that whoever she got to do this for her isn't.

I squint at her. "Are you trying to make me be afraid?"

She lifts her nose into the air. "Do vampires hunt your nightmares? Or do I? Because you know I can ruin you."

I shrug. “I don’t care what you say.”

“Is that so?” She pats a finger against her cheek. “Maybe I’ll go and have a chat with that werewolf you’ve been hanging around. Bellanore Shade, right? What do you see in her anyway? She’s a demonic werewolf. There aren’t many of them—”

“There’s, what, three of them that attend here?”

Her eyebrows lift, and she appraises me critically. “Why do you care how many are here?” she scoffs.

I swallow hard.

She gives me a chilling smile that doesn’t reach her blue eyes. “I won’t talk to Bellanore so long as you stay out of my way.”

“And just what do you think you’ll tell Bellanore?” I demand.

“Oh, a little bit of this, a little bit of that…”

“She’ll know if you’re lying.”

“Ah, but maybe I have a few friends who are fairies who have taught me a thing or two about spinning the truth.” Nia’s grin grows, and she waves her fingers at me as she walks away.

I scowl at her retreating backside. Eventually, I glance around to see who is nearby. I didn’t think anyone could’ve overheard us, but I’m all out of sorts. I’m not sure what to do, but I do think I want to stop her.

Even if that means I won’t be able to spend time with Bellanore?

Why? Why should Bellanore matter that much to me? She shouldn’t. My entire pack was killed. I should be doing everything I can to fight for their sake, and the only way to do that is to ensure that our pack survives.

Which means I do need to find love.

But I also need to survive long enough to produce an heir.

Honestly, none of this should be a concern of a sixteen-year-old, but I'm not just any sixteen-year-old. Not only am I the last surviving member of my werewolf pack, but I'm also cursed.

Cursed beyond just that of being a lone wolf.

I grit my teeth and stalk back toward the castle where I have a room that I mostly ignore. Along the way, I spy Decker Winds. The brown-haired werewolf’s alone, so I cross over to him.

Decker eyes me and gives a half-smile. “How are you, Robb?”

The two of us haven't had much time to talk alone. Most of the time, the rough crowd is always together. Just a few minutes ago, I talked to Nia alone, and now Decker? It almost makes me wonder if we're all breaking apart, fracturing, going our own separate ways.

Nia’s going straight down to Hell.

I grimace. “I’m worried about Nia,” I blurt out.

Decker’s dark eyes widen. “Why? She’s tough. She can handle just about anything.”

“I’m sure she can, but—”

“You don’t need to worry about her.”

“But she’s—”

“She’s smart too.”

I narrow my eyes, appraising him. His defense of her… Is it because they’re friends, or does he have stronger feelings for her?

“She gave another werewolf Mystic Twilight,” I say.

“Her mom makes a lot of the batches for birthdays,” Decker says with a shrug. “Not just for the Forge pack either. For a lot of them. So Nia got her hands on some. What’s that matter?”

I swallow hard. “Because that werewolf went to Blood Haven and __”

“Killed some vampires?” Decker tilts his head to the side. “I could’ve sworn we talked about going there…” he mumbles.

I wince. The last thing I want to do is learn if suppressed memories from haze avitores can be rekindled. “I just think that Nia needs to be watched.”

"I think you need to stop worrying about Nia and stop talking about her, too," Decker says hotly.

He storms off, and the heat of his fire contrasts so much with her bitter iciness.

I huff a sigh and turn around to see a blonde werewolf with narrowed blue eyes. Has she been eavesdropping?

I approach her. The werewolf crosses her arms.

“Who are you?” I ask.

“Mercy Lance,” she says. “And you?”

“I’m—”

“A nosy werewolf. What’s it matter to you what happened to a vampire statue?”

I lift my eyebrows. “Did she give it to you?”

Mercy purses her lips. “Maybe she did. Maybe she didn’t.”

“That doesn’t exactly make me think that you didn’t.”

She shrugs. “I don’t care what you think.”

“I’m sure you don’t care, but I… Can you tell me what you know about Nia?”

“Why? Because you want to drag her down? Get her kicked out of Moonstone Academy?”

“If she’s committing crimes, she should be sent to Magical Prison.”

“She’s just a teenager. They won’t send her there.”

“They will if the crime is severe enough.”

“Oh, I doubt that.”

“But—”

"There have been other fights between the two academies before. There have even been deaths. No one has ever been sent there as a

result, only expelled."

I blow out a breath. “That’s wrong,” I mumble.

“Right or wrong, that’s not your choice. That’s up to the big-wigs at HEX Unite.”

HEX Unite—Paranormal Hunters, Slayers, and Executioners Unite, an organization that has hunters, slayers, and executioners who go out and either sentence people to Magical Prison or else kills them on the spot. The students from Magical Hunters Academy almost all work at that place after graduating.

“But what about Nia herself?” I press. “Do you know her well?”

Mercy hesitates and then shakes her head. “Not very well, no,” she admits. “You’re worried she’s going to do what exactly?”

"I think she might want a war between vampires and werewolves."

“She wouldn’t be the only one.”

I eye her. “Do you?”

She pauses, bares her fangs, and then shakes her head. “I guess I can’t considering…” She huffs and rolls her eyes.

“Considering what exactly?”

“Why do you care so much? Don’t tell me you’ve fallen for a vampire too,” she grumbles.

“You’re talking about Julian, aren’t you?”

Mercy blinks a few times and then stalks toward me. “What do you know about that?” she hisses.

“Just what I saw.”

“You saw nothing,” she hisses.

I hold up my hands. “I saw nothing,” I repeat. “And Nia?”

Mercy shakes her head. “I’ve known Nia for a long time. What she wants, she gets, and if she wants war… She’ll try to find allies who will suit her to that end.”

“And those who oppose her?”

“Let’s just say that Nia’s made people disappear before.”

My skin crawls, and I swallow hard. “Those who oppose her.”

Mercy shakes her head again. “No,” she murmurs. “She makes the loved ones of those who oppose her disappear.”

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Chapter 22

Robb

I gape at Mercy. She has to be joking, but no. The werewolf is deadly serious.

My skin crawls, and I inhale sharply. "You better stay away from her then, or else your boyfriend will become a target if you don't do everything she says."

“I don’t have a boyfriend, and you don’t have to worry. Nia and I don’t see-to-eye. I… I have my… misgivings about the werewolves, but I’m not sure I actually want war. If a vampire crosses my path, I’ll ignore him or her, but if one threatens me, you better believe that I will fight back with everything I have.”

“Of course, but if you already got Mystic Twilight from her…”

“You don’t know who attacked the statue, and you don’t need to know. I will say this, though. I won’t be making it a point to seek her out.”

"Any more?" I can't help asking.

“You’re so bloody nosy,” she mumbles. “Keep your wet nose out of this.”

“I’m trying to tell you to do the same,” I say dryly.

Mercy nods. “Stay safe, Robb.”

I blink a few times, mildly shocked. “You know my name? Then why did you ask for it?”

“Maybe because you had to ask for mine. You might want to widen your pool of acquaintances if you want to get away from Nia. The last thing you want is a target on your back.”

I open my mouth, but she’s not done yet.

"Remember. She won't go after you. She'll go after your family, your friends, a girlfriend…"

My jaw clenches.

Mercy nods. “Yeah, we all have someone we can’t afford to lose, and you’ve been pegged already as one of hers just by those you associate with. You’re the one who needs to listen to your own advice.”

“I will, but, Mercy, stay away. This might get messy, and I don’t want you involved in this.”

“What a strong knight you are,” she teases. “Or are you the gallant steed instead of the knight?”

“Whatever I am, I don’t want to have to watch your back as well as my own.”

“Fair enough. I’ll stay away.” She hesitates. “I’ll keep my friends away too if I can, but if you need help…”

“I won’t call,” I say firmly.

“I’ll give you my number so you can.”

“Don’t want it.”

“You’re getting it anyhow.”

“I won’t call,” I repeat.

“You’re not a wolf. You’re a bull. Bullheaded.”

“I guess that’s better than pigheaded, isn’t it?” I quip.

Mercy gives me a wide grin. “I like you. Don’t let Nia get to you, okay? I don’t want it to come to that.”

“Me neither.”

Mercy takes a step away from me, walking backward. I think she has something more to say, but then she shakes her head, nods, turns around, and leaves.

I turn around and almost plow right into Roald.

His black hair is tousled, as if he’s been yanking on the ends, and his gray eyes narrow, glittering like hard stones.

“What are you doing going around asking about Nia?” Roald demands.

“I’m not allowed to find out about…” I hesitate.

“What are you, part fairy? Can’t even lie to my face and pretend she’s your friend, huh? None of us are. You think you’re so much better than us, don’t you?”

I stare down at Roald. “You need to get out of my face.”

“That so?” Roald purposely closes the short distance between us, bumping his chest into mine. “I don’t think I need to take orders from the likes of you.”

I place my hands on his shoulders but—barely—refrain from shoving him back. “You need to back off now.”

“No, that’s your job, Robb. You need to sit your ass down. Tuck your tail between your legs and submit.”

I howl with laughter. “Submit? To you? I don’t think so. You aren’t alpha material.”

Roald releases a growl. He presses his hands together as if praying, brings them up, and then jerks his hands apart, forcing me to release his shoulders.

“I’m not alpha material, am I?” Roald asks angrily. “And just how

can you judge? By what authority?"

"How about just because you aren't a good leader. You aren't even a good person."

"What makes you say that?" Roald growls. His upper lip curls back even as his hands curl into tight fists.

I eye him. If he wants to fight me, he can go ahead. I'm fairly certain I can take him.

Or maybe not. My wolf is dying, and so am I.

"You pick fights with everyone you meet," I start.

Roald laughs and lifts his chin. "What do you think you're doing right now?"

"If you think that Nia will—"

"You don't know Nia at all." Roald gives me a smile that's almost as chilling as any of Nia's. "You think I'm nothing more than a bumbling fool, don't you? You don't know me either. You don't know any of us, what we're capable of."

I don't move a muscle, don't blink, don't breathe, nothing. Is it possible he's been playing me all of this time? Theoretically, but I also can't imagine that I would've missed his being as diabolical as Nia.

No. He's just acting all big and tough now, but if he thinks I won't fight back, he's wrong.

My bite is worse than my bark.

It has to be.

"You don't know me at all," I say, forcing my lips to curl into a smile. "You don't know what I'm capable of."

Roald lifts his chin. "If you think you can intimidate me—"

"I think you don't know much of anything." I start to laugh, wishing that the vampires hadn't also been affected by the haze avitores so I could tease him about there being vampires who would recognize his scent and go after him if he's foolish enough to return to Blood Haven.

"Why are you laughing?" Roald asks.

He shoves my shoulders.

I stagger back a step more than I would've liked to. He's got some muscle to him even if he is mostly a bag of hot air.

"That the best you got?" I ask, cracking my knuckles.

"You want to go at this the old-fashioned way?" he asks around his fangs.

I grin. "Whichever way you want, I'm game. Prepare to lose."

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Chapter 23

Bellanore

I'm more than a little unnerved now after bumping into Julian, but mostly because of my earlier conversation with Nia. There's something about her that makes my skin crawl. She hadn't lied to me at all, but her aura is so dark that I'm wondering how it's possible that she doesn't have any demonic blood in her. Not one drop. Her soul, though, is as dark as any demon, and that terrifies me.

She is as dark as a werewolf can be for having two werewolf parents.

For the most part, paranormal species tend to marry those of the same kind. Fairies, well, they don't mind who they marry quite as much as others, but werewolves especially tend to stick to werewolves, whereas the other shifters tend to not be quite as closeminded, but even they prefer to stick to other shifters. Are there exceptions to the rule? Yes, of course, but vampires and werewolves? That's about as likely as an angel and a demon.

However, just as unlikely is a werewolf and a demon. Why do werewolves hate vampires so much? Because vampires are an abomination against nature because they survive through the destruction of another species. Yes, the earliest werewolves drank blood and ate flesh, but we evolved. We no longer need that to survive.

But vampires are a close cousin of demons. Some even say that vampires are a kind of demons, and that isn't so far off, especially with the so-called living vampires—the offspring of a demon and a vampire.

Demons are also an abomination against nature. They shouldn't even be on Earth, considering their homeland is Hell, not Earth. All demons care about is darkness, devastation, and destruction.

Yet, they can love. It's not just a claim. When my dad tells me that he's proud of me, he's not lying. He's only told me that he loves me a handful of times, but I smelled no deceit on his part.

Unless I'm not quite skilled enough to detect when a demon is

lying…

But, no. I've been able to tell when Dad's lied before. The first time I did, Mom asked Dad if he added cow's meat to the stew. He said he had, but he hadn't. I never did ask him what he added, too afraid to learn the truth. Of course, Mom asked *after* we polished off the meal.

A simple white lie. Those are usually the hardest ones for me to detect, so that I spotted that one should suggest that I can see his larger ones, but maybe not. Maybe he's too deceitful for me to be able to discern his truths from his lies.

Unless he wishes me to.

I swallow hard. The thought makes me even more nervous. My attempts to uncover my dad's plot have long grown cold, and I doubt I'll be able to pick up the trail again any time soon, if ever.

"There you are!" Ellamaria rushes up to me and interlocks our arms. "Come. Let's go get something to eat."

"I'm not hungry," I mumble.

"Of course you are. Don't be silly."

Ellamaria actually pulls on my arm, trying to get me to walk with her, but I hold my ground.

"What's wrong?" she asks quietly.

"I'm trying to think."

"I thought I smelled something burning," she quips. "I am hankering for some smores. What do you say?"

I hold up a hand, trying to remember everything Nia said when I realize what my best friend just said.

"Smores? But you hate chocolate."

She giggles. "Yes, but maybe I can try a smores anyhow. I've heard so much about them, the gooey marshmallows, the cinnamon graham crackers, the melted chocolate… Maybe if I have an open mind…"

"You hate all forms of chocolate," I protest.

"You can't ever accept that, so for you, I'm willing to make an exception," she says firmly. "I thought that would make you happy. Come on. Let's go—"

"No."

"Then let's head off campus. You mentioned that place Robb took you to. Let's go there. If we leave now, we can be back before the rest of the classes start."

I shake my head. "Fine. Let's go to the courtyard."

We head that way, Ellamaria chatting up a storm, but then her steps slow until she halts entirely.

"I can make us something back at the castle," she announces. She turns about so sharply that she nearly yanks my arm out of the socket.

"What? Why? You can't cook—"

"I can. My mom's been teaching me, and I—"

"Why are you being like this?" I ask. "You're being really strange. First, the smores thing, then wanting to leave when you know full well we'll never make it in time, and now this? You mentioned burning. That's what we'll actually smell if you try to cook anything."

Ellamaria's face looks pained as she lifts her nose into the air. "I've never been more insulted in my life."

"Sure you haven't."

She opens her mouth, but at that moment, I can hear the other students. They're talking excitedly about something or other, and a lot of them are starting to leave, all heading in the same direction, well before the classes are to start up again.

Nia. Is she up to something?

I yank myself free from Ellamaria and grab an arm of a werewolf in the crowd, Anna Snowblood.

"What's going on?" I ask desperately, somehow knowing that something very wrong is going on.

Anna's eyes sparkle. "There's a fight," she says excitedly.

"Between…"

"Roald and someone."

"Roald and Wyatt?"

She shakes her head and rushes to catch up with the crowd.

Dumbfounded, I glance at Ellamaria. Guilt clings to her like a second cloak. All she needs is a scythe, and she'll look like a grim reaper.

"You knew about the fighting," I say slowly. "You wanted to stop me from learning about it, which means…"

My eyes widen, and I race away, ignoring Ellamaria who calls for me to stop. I don't know if it's fear or rage or some kind of latent demonic ability, but I'm running so fast that I generate enough wind to make my face blubber, and I'm barely breathing hard as I reach the massive circle of onlookers.

"How much money do you want to put down?"

"Twenty."

"On Roald, right?"

"Nah, I'll do it on the other guy. He's fighting like he's demonic or something."

My heart aches. They're taking bets? Seriously? Why aren't any professors here to stop this?

I glance over to see the speakers. One of them has his wallet out. Rage has me seeing red, and I slap the wallet out of his hand and onto the ground.

"What the…" He trails off as he realizes who did that.

I tilt my head to the side and bare my teeth. "Don't bet on this and go get a professor."

“You can’t tell him what to do,” the other werewolf says, bending down to pick up the wallet.

My heel slams down on his hand on the wallet that doesn’t belong to him. “Do not try me, or else there will be another fight.”

“You wouldn’t,” he says, trying to get his hand free from beneath my boot.

I press down harder and draw my other leg back so I can kick him square in the nose.

He winces and turns his face to the side.

I smirk. Coward.

I slowly release the pressure of my boot, and he yanks his hand free. The other werewolf dashes to retrieve his wallet, and he puts it away, which makes me feel much better.

Well, not much better. This is all so very wrong on so many levels.

Elbows and shoves help me force my way to the front, and then I can see them, two wolves, fighting hard. Neither has the upper hand, but even though I’ve never seen Roald in wolf form before, I can easily recognize him. What’s worse is that my fears are realized.

Robb is the one fighting Roald.

Ellamaria. Anger laces through me. She deliberately tried to distract me from the fight.

With only mild regard for my safety, I dash forward into the no man's land that contains only the two fighting werewolves. It might be suicide, but I dare to interject myself, putting myself between them.

“Stop this!” I shout.

My attempt to break them apart? Yeah, it’s not something I think will actually work, and the two werewolves eye me.

The first thing I notice is that Robb’s wolf maintains his scar. There’s a patch of fur along the scar that just isn’t growing. He’s lean for a wolf, but he looks mean too, and that might make all the difference in the world.

Robb moves, and I think it’s to try to go around me, maybe to protect me, but Roald’s already lunging. He’s trying to bite my head off.

Instinctively, I can feel it, my wolf. She wants to be let out, but there’s something else. Not that there’s another animal inside me, but the thought of turning into an eagle with sharp talons to drag across him comes over me, and I swear I can feel the start of feathers forming beneath my skin.

The shock that I might actually be able to shift into something other than a wolf startles me so much that I immediately stop, reverse course, and unleash my wolf. All of this happens in a mere blink of the eye, and I manage to duck, roll, and slash with my claws. I miss Roald, but his attack misses me too.

In seconds, I'm rounding on him. My wolfish mouth foams, and I snap at Roald, my canines clanging together. My mouth salivates at the possibilities of sinking my fangs into his flesh, and before I can consider if it's wise or not, I chase Roald away. He can't be anywhere near Robb or any of the other students, not if he's going to be so destructive and vindictive. There's no place for that here at Moonstone Academy.

Honestly, there's no place for that anywhere on Earth.

My wolf is faster than animal wolves, which max out at about thirty-five to thirty-seven miles per hour. Dad's clocked me at forty-three miles per hour once.

Roald's faster than wolf animals, too, but he's lagging. I'm catching up. He's maybe thirty-eight, thirty-nine miles per hour. I nip at his heels, almost making a game of it, trying to see if he can go any faster, but he fails. Pathetic.

Why don't I just end this? End him?

That's the demon in me talking, and I'm content to chase Roald to the edge of the campus. He has a paw on a tree, hunched over, breathing hard. Then, he straightens on all fours again and takes a step toward me. I growl a warning, and he steps back.

I inch backward, watching him, pinning him there beneath the tree with my gaze. He doesn't move, watching me as I am him. A few more steps back, and he doesn't move, and I can't help the feeling of smug satisfaction that rolls over me, especially as Roald sits beneath the tree.

It's almost as if he's submitting himself to me, showing respect even though I'm not his alpha.

I'll take it, but it's not enough. He attacked Robb, and that won't stand.

But why did he attack Robb? What has Robb gotten himself into? Is Ellamaria right in her worry over what's going on with him and that rough crowd?

What will it take to break Robb away from them? It's not as if any one of them is his alpha. Robb should be able to walk away at any time.

Maybe Robb can walk away from me.

I'm not sure where the thought comes from, but with it comes that sense of foreboding I felt earlier. Somehow, someway, I just know Robb is hiding something from me, something huge, something that could change everything.

I haven't a clue what it might be, and I'm not even sure I want to find out. Why can't things continue as they are?

No. No, things can't stay like this because if they do, it'll only get worse. Roald and Robb came to fight each other as wolves. They

didn’t seem to seriously hurt one another this time, but the next…

Because if nothing changes, there will be a next time, and I might not be there to play peacemaker.

By the moon, next time, I might not play peacemaker.

I might play gravedigger.

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Chapter 24

Bellanore

For a couple of feet, I walk away, still as my wolf. I can smell better in this form, and I can tell that Roald is staying put. Maybe he's still in his wolf, waiting to see when I've gone far enough away for him to venture and leave that spot.

Why? Why don't I just go back there and fight him myself? I know I can take him down. That's not a question.

But if I do that, Robb will never forgive me. It'll wound his pride, and I won't do that to him. I won't fight his battles for him.

Not that I even know what the fight had been about.

I exhale a snort through my nose. My dad always told me to never interfere in another's battle, that I will have enough of my own to fight. Every so often, my dad would ask if I ever stuck my nose in a fight that didn't concern me, and the answer has always been no.

It still is no.

A fight with Robb is a fight with me. Pure and simple.

Dad won't see it that way, and that's fine. He's been wrong before even if he won't admit it.

The wind shifts, and I smell another wolf. Robb. He stands on a hill, in his wolf form. His fur is as black as his hair, and his eyes are a lighter amber than most wolves'. The vast majority of werewolves have amber eyes when in their wolf forms, but I'm pretty sure mine might remain glowing green. His eyes still glow a bit too.

His wolf nods at me, and then he turns into his human. I wait until I slowly climb up to stand beside him to transform into myself. I'm careful with the transformation. The thought that I might be able to shift into an eagle or anything other than a wolf alarms me. It shouldn't, but it does. Why hasn't Dad taught me how to shift into other animals? Is he afraid of what the other students will do if they learn I can do that? No, that can't be it. My dad doesn't fear anything.

On second claw, he has to fear something. I just don't know what it is.

Robb reaches out and holds my hand. He squeezes it, and then he

starts to lead me away. I allow him to take me along, far more willing to be directed by him than I had been Ellamaria.

Eventually, we leave the campus. We've been silent this entire time, and I look straight ahead. From the corner of my eye, though, I can see his aura. It's silver and gray and black and white, all meshed together, and it's beautiful and unique and unlike any other I've ever seen.

I've become very adept at seeing a person and seeing them, their body, without always noticing their auras, and this is the first time I fully see his even if it is indirectly. A person's aura is a personal thing, very private. I probably should ask before looking at someone's.

Finally, we spy a place with outdoor seating. We're deep within a human town, and we don't wait to be seated. We just claim spots beneath a large red umbrella.

A waitress approaches right away, but Robb merely flicks his wrist, and she walks away.

We're still holding hands, resting them on the table, and Robb places his other hand on top too. I do likewise with mine, and now, we're holding both hands.

"Tell me about your mom," Robb says. "Will you ever want me to meet her?"

I grin even though the subject isn't a happy one. I'm just glad he doesn't want to talk about what just happened because I certainly don't.

"I don't think she'll want to meet you," I say honestly.

"Why not try to use me as leverage to get her to see you? 'Mom, I met this dashing werewolf. I think he might be the best werewolf in the world. You just have to meet him!' Think that'll get her to crawl out of hiding!"

"Hush!" I say, leaning forward to hiss the whisper, but then I can't help giggling. No one's around, so no one could've heard him, but still. And the falsetto he used to impersonate me is impressive.

"Is that a yes?" he asks, tilting his head to the side, giving me a perfectly adorable crooked smile.

"It's a no. That won't work."

"No? What about Dad?" he asks casually.

"Young man, you better have the best of intentions with my little girl. I know every trick in the book. Hell, I wrote the book."

Robb blinks a few times. "Is that how your dad really sounds? How did you do that?"

"Is that how your dad really sounds?" I ask, switching from the super deep booming voice of my dad to the slightly less deep voice of Robb's.

His jaw drops. "That's insane."

“Not insane. It’s just something I’ve always been able to do.”

“Really? It’s not like a demon thing, is it?”

I can see his mind churning. He's trying to figure out what exactly demons can and can't do. Honestly, I don't even know the extent myself. Then again, I'm only a half-breed, so it's possible I might not be able to do everything that demons can do. Maybe I can turn into only a handful of animals, whereas demons can turn into anything they want.

Or maybe anyone they want. Hmm. Is it possible to take on the appearance of a human? Of a werewolf?

If that’s the case, my impersonations will come in handy.

“No, it’s not a demon thing,” I say. “After all, there are humans who make a living doing impressions.”

Robb gives the barest hint of a smile. “That’s true. I hadn’t thought about that. You could probably make a killing.”

I’m not even sure why, but his word choice makes me flinch.

“So even though your dad is a demon, he’ll still be overly protective of you?” he asks.

“Why wouldn’t he be? I’m his little girl.”

He considers this and then nods a few times.

“Does the idea of meeting my dad terrify you?” I ask.

“Should it?”

That’s a good question. There hasn’t been a guy I’ve even considered taking home to meet Dad before.

Wait. Am I even entertaining this?

“Are you asking about my parents because you want to meet them?” I ask.

“Is there a reason why you wouldn’t want me to meet them?” he counters.

I swallow hard. “I think my dad would act like the normal dad, the whole shotgun bit. Maybe a bit of Hellfire. Pretend we have a hellhound for a pet. We don’t,” I add hastily because Robb looks a little pale.

“I wouldn’t have taken you for a dog person.”

“No? You think I’m a cat person?” I ask.

“No. I think you’re just about you and nothing else. Nothing wrong with that.”

“I wouldn’t think many werewolves would have pets,” I mumble.

“No.” He laughs a bit, but it sounds a little forced. It’s clear he’s out of sorts still from the fight, and who can blame him?

“I’m honestly not sure if Dad will care. Or maybe he’ll care too much and just off you. Who knows? I can’t be sure.”

“Maybe it would be better if I don’t meet him then, huh?”

“Might be for the best,” I agree.

He rolls his neck and winces as he rubs the back of his neck.

"Are you hurt at all?" I ask even though I should've asked him long before now.

"I'll live," he says dryly.

"Well, that's good."

He stares at me, through me, his gaze piercing and haunted. I can't look away. There's a pain in his depths that will drown me. Is that how he feels every moment of the day? How has he not succumbed to the waves of depression that threatens to engulf him?

My breath catches in my throat, and any words that I might offer him seem to only diminish what he's going through. It's incredible to me that he's able to attend this academy, considering there aren't any other Alines here to help him through all of this. He needs his pack more than ever before.

Robb Aline just might be the strongest werewolf I know.

"What's it like to have a demon for a dad?" he asks.

"I have nothing to compare it to, of course," I say with an awkward laugh.

Now's not the time for jokes, Bellanore!

I shrug one shoulder. "It's not all bad. He has his secrets, and he won't tell me about his business. He won't share what he does for hobbies. Outside of his teaching me, we don't spend a lot of time together."

"What about before you attended Moonstone Academy?" Robb asks.

I just shake my head, my hair falling forward with the movement. "Even then, he didn't make a lot of time for me. I mostly had to fend for myself."

"Basically, you have two parents, but neither one of them truly care for you."

I gape at him. "It's not as bad as all that," I protest.

"You sure about that?"

My first instinct is to defend them, but why is that? Robb has a point. It's not as if my parents have truly been there for me whenever I need them. I'm about as self-sufficient as a werewolf can be, and that's probably because of my demonic side.

"I'm not about to complain to you about my parents, considering…" I trail off and squeeze my eyes shut. I'm so stupid! How could I have said that to an orphan?

But Robb's just giving me a look of pity.

I hate pity.

A sour taste fills my mouth, and I swallow hard. A lump forms in my stomach, and I try to hide my anger. Robb doesn't deserve my wrath. If anyone does, my dad does. My mom too. They're the ones to

have wronged me.

"When I was little, maybe four or so, I asked my mom if I would ever have a brother or sister," I say in a rush in a vain attempt to suppress my anger.

"What did she say?"

"Mom asked me if I thought she was a good mom. This was before she basically abandoned me. I said yes. She then asked if Dad was a good dad."

"You said yes again, didn't you?"

"I did. Mom… She seemed shocked, which surprised me, but I told her that Dad would play games with me. That's how we tried to teach me different demonic abilities, by making them fun games. Mom hadn't realized until then what Dad was doing."

"Is that when she started to pull away?"

"Now that I think back on it…" This is a truth I haven't truly admitted to myself, but there's no reason to lie to Robb or to myself. "Yes," I murmur. "It wasn't obvious at first. Then, when I was about thirteen, Dad and I got into a huge fight. I can't even remember why. Maybe I wasn't learning something as quickly as he thought I should've. Maybe he wanted to teach me something I didn't want to learn. Whatever the reason, I remember that I shouted at him, informing him that I was glad I was an only child so he wouldn't screw up two kids' lives, just mine."

"How did your dad react?"

I smile wanly. "He just laughed and said that the other demons call him soft for basically raising me, for not allowing me to just fend for myself. He…"

"He trusted you to survive."

"No. He thought I wasn't strong enough to live without him. I think he legit thought I would die if he left me to my own devices." I start to laugh, but a sudden realization makes the sound cut off all strangled.

What if Dad had been afraid that if he left me to my own devices, other demons would come around and off me? Or one of his other business associates or enemies? Because I'm sure that some of his associates become angry with him at times. Dad can be very charming when he wants to be, but he can also get under people's skin and hurt them like no one else can.

Robb reaches over and places a hand on my shoulder. He gently squeezes, and I stare up at him.

"Dad thinks I can't survive without him, but he has been giving me more and more freedom lately. I haven't had a lesson with him in a bit, and I… I have no idea what he's up to, and I don't know if I can trust him."

“Do you think he’ll hurt you?”

I hesitate. Would he?

If he learned that I lied about Draz…

I swallow hard.

Robb squeezes my shoulder again. “I won’t let him,” he growls.

“As if Dad would let you stop him,” I say dryly. “He’ll kill you first.”

A muscle jumps in his throat. I can actually see his vein pulse from his blood pumping. His heart rate is sped up. He's gearing for a fight.

I just shake my head and laugh a little. “I don’t think I’m in any danger right now, or am I?” I gaze up at him.

Robb stares down at me. The hardness in his eyes makes the sky-blue orbs glow more than normal. Slowly, his gaze drops to my mouth.

“Yes, you’re in danger,” he murmurs.

I close my eyes and wait for his kiss.

Instead, I feel his teeth against the delicate skin of my neck.

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Chapter 25

Robb

I nip at her throat, biting gently. Slowly, I press harder and harder, waiting for her to react.

She doesn't.

My teeth press even harder until I risk cutting her. Only then do I draw back.

Her eyes are wide, but she doesn't look upset. Well, not angry at least.

"Some kiss," she says, her lips twisting into a scowl.

I can't help giving her a crooked smile. "You don't like a bit of danger?"

"No. What are you pretending to be? A vampire?"

"No. I just…" I throw up my hands. "I don't know. All of this talk about demons and whether or not your life is in danger…"

"So you bite my neck to do what exactly? To prove that the world is dangerous?"

"Or maybe that you are in danger even with me. Maybe you shouldn't be so close to me."

"You want to push me away?" she asks, crossing her arms.

"Yes."

"You're a danger to me?"

"Yes."

"You'll hurt me?"

I hesitate.

Her eyes narrow, and I know she can tell if I'm lying.

So I don't answer.

Her eyes are even smaller slits now. "What do you mean you'll hurt me? How? Why? When?"

I expel a breath. For whatever reason, I feel compelled to answer with the truth, and not just because she can tell if I'm lying or not.

"Because if we continue this, if we grow even closer, it will hurt you when I die."

Her lips part, and her eyes lighten. A slow smile spreads across her

face.

"So the bite was to warn me that you're dangerous," she says, slowly walking around me in a circle, her fingers barely touching me as she goes. "You want to prove you're a big, tough wolf, huh?"

She stops when she comes in front of me again, and her fingers barely touch my scar. I close my eyes, relishing in her feathery-soft touch. No one else has touched me along my scar before.

Her lips press against mine, and I wrap my arms around her waist, yanking her closer to me. I need her, need her… Need her what exactly? Her faith? Her hope?

Her vigor, her life, her beating heart.

She breaks off the kiss and giggles softly, but this is no laughing matter, and my hold on her tightens so she can't back away and retreat.

"I already know you're big and tough. We just came from you and Roald fighting, remember?" she asks.

I grit my teeth and bite down on my tongue so hard it bleeds. Coppery bitterness fills my mouth, and I turn my head to the side and spit. The bloody saliva streaks in a nice arc to hit the grass.

"That's disgusting," Bellanore murmurs.

I can't help laughing. "I'm disgusting. Repulsive. I don't know what it says about you that you want to be with someone like me."

"Hmm. Maybe it's because you aren't as dark and mysterious as you think. I'm sorry about your past, Robb. It was dark and tragic, but it doesn't have to be the end. You can have a wonderful future—"

"Your optimism is delightful, but I don't share it."

"Why not?" She yanks back enough that I allow her to have some space between us. Bellanore grabs my hands and forces me to dance with her. Not that we're really dancing. I'm just following her in a circle. "We are young. We can do whatever we want. My dad doesn't get to dictate what we do. So I won't take you to meet him. It's no big deal. My mom doesn't even want to see me. You think she'll want to meet my boyfriend?"

I can't help it. As much as I want to wallow in despair, she always knows what to say to bring me back to the light, and I find myself teasing her. "Oh, yeah? You would think she'll be happy that you're dating a werewolf."

Bellanore gasps, eyes wide, and she clings to me in a tight hug before reclaiming my hands to force me to spin in a circle again. "We can pretend you're a demon! Maybe that'll draw her out!"

"And if she tells your dad, your dad will kill me before he realizes I'm actually a werewolf," I deadpan.

"True, but to see the look on Mom's face…" She trails off, and I just know it's because she just wants to see her mom's face.

It's not fair. Life took my parents away through horrific death, but life has already taken Bellanore's parents too even though they still live.

“Earlier this year, I actually… Ellamaria claimed my dad was my favorite parent,” she murmurs, no longer dancing but still holding my hands.

“What changed that?”

She bites her lower lip. “He—”

Her phone rings. Mine vibrates.

With a growl of frustration, I grab my phone to see an alert.

“We have to go back to campus,” she says.

“Yeah. Lockdown.”

“Because of the fight,” she adds.

“Most likely.”

She cants her head to the side. “Or maybe because of the statue.”

“What statue?” I ask even though I already know.

“A werewolf vandalized Blood Haven Academy property.” Bellanore shakes her head. “This isn’t good. There shouldn’t be bad blood between the two schools.”

“Why not?”

"I mean, yeah, there's been threats of attacks before, but I don't think anyone ever did something like that before. Anyone who would've was always caught and ran off before something bad could happen." She shrugs. "I don't like the idea of the animosity."

“And here I worried you would thrive on it.”

“Because I’m part-demon.” She stiffens beside me as we start to walk. I assumed she would teleport us back, but I’m fine with us talking longer. Clearly, she is too, even if she doesn’t care for what I’m talking about.

“Well, you did sweep in between two snarling, vicious werewolves. You stood between us as a human. I’ll never forget that.”

She glances at me, and a slow smile spreads across her face. She’s beautiful, with her glowing eyes and her black and white hair, but that’s not what draws me to her. She has an inner strength that comes from acceptance.

She’s accepted both parts of her.

I need to accept what’s happened to me. Maybe then I’ll experience the peace she has before I die.

A rock underfoot makes me trip, and Bellanore reaches out to steady me. I lean on her more than I should because a wave of weakness runs through me.

My time is running out.

“I do draw on it some,” she finally says as we resume walking. “It’s demonic, but yes, anger, hatred, all of that does lend me power, but I

also can from others, from my pack, even from friends. Well, from Ellamaria mostly, and she is in my pack, so maybe not—"

"You can draw from me if you need to," I offer even though I don't have anything to give her.

Her smile, though, makes the words feel true, and maybe it's not a lie. She would sense that, so maybe I can give her something.

But, what?

Nothing but heartache and pain.

Another text alert from the school has Bellanore sighing. "Ready?" she asks.

Before I can respond, she teleports us back.

"I don't know if classes are happening," she says, gazing at the huge crowd of werewolves heading toward the central courtyard of the campus. "Want to see what's going on?"

I shake my head. "You can. I think I'm gonna skip my last classes."

"Maybe not. They might not be held."

She really does see everything through rose-colored glasses. An optimistic half-demon.

No, that's her werewolf side.

I wonder which side lends Bellanore her strength? It's not just brute strength, although she is strong physically. She has a quieter, inner strength, too, a power of conviction that I envy.

She's strong, far stronger than I am, and I'm not just talking physically. That fight with Roald… it only just started. If it had lasted much longer, Roald would've learned the truth. He would've discovered my secret, and everyone would've realized that I'm weak. I'm far too weak. I'm almost a runt now.

Werewolves despise runts.

Runts are to be killed to prevent them from passing on their inferior genes to the next line of werewolves.

Every day, I'm weaker. Eventually, I won't be able to walk. What then? I shouldn't be wasting my time here.

I shouldn't be worried about classes or anything like that.

A realization comes to me, something I have been trying to ignore, to forget.

I hate my life.

Yes, I hate everything about it, even Bellanore. While she might very well be the best thing to ever happen to me, I will have to force a goodbye out of her just as I was forced to say goodbye to my parents, to my brother, to my entire pack.

My heart is beating slowly, a three-beat cadence that I swear sounds like "run away, run away, run away…"

If only I could.

But I can't.

Or can't I? Maybe running away would be the best for everyone.

No. No, I can't. I'm weak, yes, but I'm too weak to leave Bellanore. I need her for as long as I can.

I'm stuck in this gray in-between, not really living, not yet dead.

I need to just deal with everything, with Bellanore and my growing feelings, with the curse, with my guilt, all of it.

I've always dealt with everything before. I need to now too.

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Chapter 26

Bellanore

The headmaster Virgil Thorn, a werewolf with black hair and amber eyes, is in the center of the group, going on about the lockdown, how he thinks this is for the best since the students haven't proven themselves to be prudent, blah, blah, blah. It's a load of nonsense, considering he's referring to the vampire statue incident only and not the fight that broke out between Robb and Roald.

Why hadn't I asked him about that? I should've, but Robb and I… Sometimes, there's something spoken in the quiet, and I can almost hear what he's saying.

Almost but not quite.

Is it just his grief? There's something he can't bring to words, an unspeakable pain that he's suffering, and I don't know if I can help him through it or if I will only make things worse for him. As much as I want to help him, I don't want to risk hurting him in another fashion.

My shoulders are all knotted, and I try to roll them to ease the tension as I abandon the crowd. Ellamaria isn't here. Maybe she's back in the room. I wonder what she'll say about the fight. She kept me from it because she sought to keep me safe. She knew I would interfere, and I shudder to think what might've happened if I hadn't. Roald is strong, but Robb is stronger, isn't he? Robb would've won, right? I mean, he did take down a drow.

But he had been blinded by rage and grief then. Unless Roald insulted his honor, would Robb have unleashed his inner wolf entirely? Would Robb have been able to control his wolf to prevent himself from killing again? As much as I don't care for Roald, I wouldn't want him dead.

The pain from my shoulders radiates to my neck, and I rub the back there to try to help. The wind shifts, carrying the scent of freshly cut grass and nature. A few small woodland animals are nearby, but I leave them be. They aren't frightened of werewolves in our human forms, not even in our wolf forms. Only if we come at them as a

predator. They recognize us as animals, and that is what we partially are.

Human and animal.

Predator and ally.

The wind turns a bit colder, and I close my eyes, halting my slow pace to enjoy the sweet caress. When Robb bit my neck, I had been shocked more than anything. It hadn't hurt, and he did it to startle me. He's dangerous, yes, a killer, but only because he had to be. He had no choice. The world treated him cruelly, so he, in turn, had to be cruel back. Otherwise, he might have been killed too.

I never would have met him.

And my life would have been that much bleaker for it.

My heart aches for him. As much as I want to ask him to tell me about his family, I also don't want to pry. By mentioning that I wanted a sibling, I hoped he would talk to me about Rickard, but he didn't talk about his brother. I should respect that, and I have so far, but I do wish he would tell me. I haven't faced loss like he has, so maybe I'm wrong, but I would've thought that talking might help to ease the hurt, to soothe the pain, to maybe even make it seem like his brother is alive again.

But it might make things worse. It's conceivable that Robb might even feel so guilty over the entire matter—guilt that not only did he live while his family died, but also guilt over having killed another even if no one else would begrudge him that death.

Lost in my thoughts, I open my eyes and start to walk again.

The wind shifts yet again, carrying a new scent. My mouth grows dry, and I stiffen. I should just teleport away, but maybe it's because Robb stood up to Roald that I decide to turn around and face Wyatt.

"Well, well, well," the bully says as he stalks over to me as if he's a lion and I'm a zebra.

But the funny thing about that? The lions are lazy. It's the lionesses who do the hunting.

"What do we have here?" Wyatt crones, continuing to advance toward me. He sniffs and wrinkles his nose as if smelling something foul. "Has anyone ever told you that you smell?"

"And what do I smell like exactly?" I ask even though I should know better than to encourage him.

"You smell worse than a wet dog. More like a—"

"Oh, no, honey," I say. "I smell like victory. That's why you aren't used to the smell."

"Oh, ho! Someone has a mouth on her. Thinks she's all big and bad, does she? But she's here alone."

"So what if I am?" I shrug one shoulder. "So are you, and honestly, I have the edge on you."

“I don’t think so.” He curls back his upper lip. “You think you’re so tough, that you’re better than all of us, but you aren’t. You aren’t even a true she-wolf. You’re nothing but a bit of darkness. You and your wolf don’t belong here at this school. You don’t belong anywhere here on Earth.”

“That so?” I ask mildly.

He stalks the rest of the way to close the distance between us, moving faster than I anticipated, but he doesn’t touch me.

Not yet at least.

“So if you don’t want me here or on Earth… You don’t want to kill me because then I would be buried. Or you want me to burn, but then my bones would remain…” I wrinkle my nose. “That wouldn’t work either then, buddy.”

He flares his nostrils. “You belong in Hell.”

I smile broadly. “Want me to drag you there? Because I’m fairly certain I’m willing to do just that.”

“You’re nothing but a—”

"I suggest you choose your next words wisely," I say softly as I reach up and drag a finger-turned-claw along his jawline to dig in beneath his chin, forcing his head up even though I'm shorter than he is. "Or those words may well be your last."

He erupts into laughter. “You think that just because your boyfriend was willing to have a go with Roald that you have courage now? You think you’re going to take me on? Take me out? I don’t think so.”

“Hmm. Fine. Whatever. You aren’t worth the breath anyhow.”

I don't want anything to do with him. Why I even bother to snap at him, I'm not sure, but I should've just teleported immediately.

Before I can do just that, Wyatt grabs my arm, which means I’m not going to. No way am I going to teleport him anywhere with me.

Although the thought of teleporting deep within the ocean does hold a certain appeal…

“You need to be put in your place,” Wyatt hisses.

“Do I? Or is that you?” I ask. I try to jerk free, but he tightens his grip to the point that I can feel bruises form.

“You’re a real smart ass. Or is that dumb ass?” he mocks.

“Takes one to know one.”

Puerile? Yes, but it’s worth it to see the flash of anger in his eyes.

His backhand, though, stings more than I care to admit.

A low growl rumbles from deep in my throat. My wolf longs to come out so I can lash out at him and go for his jugular. The thought of not just violence but of a killing blow startles me enough that I don’t act.

“Get your paw off me before I remove it,” I say, my tone as cold as

ice.

“You want a paw on you? That can be arranged.” And the hand on me grows fur as Wyatt shifts just his one arm.

The urge to transform into something other than a wolf is so strong that I almost consider it, but I’m not sure what to alter myself into or if I’ll even be able to.

That moment of indecision costs me, and Wyatt lunges, clawing at my face.

I duck and dodge to the right, throwing a rabbit punch to the base of his skull. He staggers, and I grin, knowing his vision turned black for a second.

Telegraphing his move, Wyatt swings as he whirls around. Again, I duck, sidestepping so I can swivel my hips and throw my weight into a round kick that strikes his midsection. The blow lands, but he's unfazed, and I grit my teeth, backing up. Both of us as humans, he has the edge. I'm faster, but he has a longer reach and more power. Like it or not, he does. Besides, he has one arm that's a wolf already. It won't take much of anything for him to transform all of the way.

As wolves, who will have the upper hand? The upper paw? I’m not sure.

And I’m not sure I want to find out.

“How brave of you,” I say, circling him as he follows me. “Fighting a girl all alone.”

“You aren’t a girl. You’re a monster.”

“Monster, huh? How insulting. Oh, wait, I don’t care what you think of me.”

“Monsters need to be put down.”

“And why did you wait until now to come after me?”

“Oh, believe me. I wanted you dead since I first laid eyes on you and realized you’re an abomination.”

“Then why did you let me live this long?”

“I was waiting.”

“For what? The right time? The right moment?”

“To see what you would do.”

I stop circling him but keep my hands up. I’m not about to lower my guard. “And what have I done?”

“Because of you, others have taken it upon themselves to lash out and turn toward violence that they would’ve never even thought of before.”

“Right, because werewolves aren’t violent at all.” I roll my eyes.

"Your presence is what inspired the others to act against the vampires. You alone are going to be the cause of a war between—"

“Oh, please. I am not nearly that important.”

I step back. I’ll teleport and—

Two things happen before I can.

Wyatt jumps at me, shifting in mid-air.

And Robb arrives. He launches into the air, shifting just as Wyatt does, and he collides right into Wyatt's side, knocking him down well before he can strike me.

The two wolves go at it, ripping and tearing into each other, an entanglement of claws and fangs. There's no way for me to even try to break them apart, and I'm not sure there's a way that I'll be able to wedge myself between them as I had with Robb and Roald.

The scent of blood sears my nostrils, and I swallow hard as I strive to discern which wolf is injured enough to bleed. They're clashing like bucks with their antlers all intertwined and knotted, and one second Robb's on top, and then Wyatt is. Back and forth. One wolf's claws tears through the air, swiping toward the other's face in a wide arc, but the other brings up a paw, blocks the blow, and then presses down with all of his might. A snapping sound makes me wince. That arm just broke.

The injured wolf tries to retreat some, and I can finally tell that this wolf is Wyatt. He's breathing heavy, panting, his tongue out.

Robb circles a bit and then draws back onto his haunches and then launches into the air again, pouncing again. Wyatt tries to run away, but Robb chases him down and stomps on Wyatt's tail. He slashes at Wyatt's back, leaving three claw marks, drawing more blood.

Wyatt yelps. He jerks his body free from Robb's hold, and he scampers away as fast as he can on his three good paws.

Robb starts after him until I call out, "Robb!"

His wolf turns toward me, and I grin.

"Want to get out of here? Dinner's on me."

Robb shifts back to himself. He's more than a little dirty, so it's strange that his clothes are entirely clean, but he just waits until he's done heaving down air, his heartbeat slowing back to a normal level.

"It's a date," he rasps.

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Chapter 27

Bellanore

I wait impatiently for Robb. He insisted on taking a quick shower before we go, and I can't say that I blame him. He might also want to check over his wounds.

The more I think about that fight, the more shocked I am by how Robb just went at Wyatt like that. He just pulverized him. It's insane.

The longer I wait, the more I start to think about our approaching date. When I suggested dinner, I meant off campus. We need the space after everything that went down with Roald and Wyatt.

There's one issue with that, though. We're under lockdown.

And then I laugh. I doubt they would've thought about having the place warded so I can't use teleportation. I'm the only demonic werewolf in attendance here. Besides, they might not even realize that demons can teleport. Demons can be rather tight-lipped at times, and they like to keep tricks up their sleeves.

So… where should we go? There are a few places that come to mind, and I'm still debating when I realize it's been a good half-hour since Robb went inside his place.

After a moment, I walk around until I can smell the room he's in. Due to wallcrawling, I'm able to climb up to the third-story window. It's not too hard to open the window even though I'm on the outside, and I slip in to find Robb asleep on his bed.

The shower must've tuckered him out. Poor guy. A fight like that right after fighting Roald… I should've known better than to think he would be up for eating. Then again, I thought our date would've just been dinner and nothing else because I did think he'd be too tired for anything else. A full belly, and he'd be out.

I turn to go.

"Bellanore."

His voice is weak, colored by his exhaustion.

I face him. "You rest," I say gently. "I'll go and—"

He holds out a hand toward me. "You can stay."

Heat rushes to my face, and I duck my head. He's turned toward

me, his eyes half-hooded. His hand is still outstretched.

"You should sleep," I murmur.

"I can sleep with you as my bodyguard."

I giggle and then stop abruptly. "Do you think they'll come back at you?"

"Who knows?"

"Don't think about them," I say, my tone turning firm. "I'll stay."

"I don't want you to stay to be my bodyguard."

I melt. "I know," I assure him. "But you don't have to worry."

"I'm not afraid," he says.

The raw honesty in his tone leaves me aching because I can read what he's not saying as clearly as if he uttered the words.

I'm not afraid to die.

He shouldn't be thinking that. He hadn't been injured, not that grievously.

Unless he was, and I didn't realize.

I cross over to him and take his hand. His squeeze is barely perceptible. The poor guy. That's how tired he is.

"I'll stay," I repeat.

"Oh, yeah?" He cracks an eye open. "You'll stay with me until the bitter end?"

I nod, unable to speak past a lump in my throat.

"Maybe even beyond."

He snorts, the sound soft *and* disgruntled. "Join me in Hell, huh?"

"You think you're going to Hell?" I ask, surprise coloring my words.

Robb squeezes his eyes shut, and he gives a curt nod, the movement sharp and precise, completely at odds with his slow speech.

As much as I want to ask why he thinks that, I don't.

"I failed my pack," he murmurs.

"No. No, you didn't. Your family died, and you avenged them. You were well within your rights to do just that. You can't blame yourself for what happened."

"I can, and I do."

"Did you kill them?" I demand, my tone now harsh.

"No, but—"

"Did your actions directly result in the drow killing them?"

"No, but—"

"Then there are no buts," I say firmly. "Now, I'm sorry, but stop it. You aren't the sun."

"No?" He chuckles weakly.

"You aren't the center of the universe." My heart skips a beat. If I want to, I know the truth of the matter is that he very well could become the center of *my* universe, and the thought scares me. What

will Dad think? How will he react? As much as I want to know what darkness my dad is involved in, I also want his approval. We have a complicated relationship.

"You're all I have," Robb mumbles.

I close my eyes to hold back tears. Once I recover my emotions, I open them, intent on reminding him that he has the rest of his pack and his alpha, but a soft snore stills my tongue. He's sleeping.

My hand squeezes his, and I turn to go, but he ever so faintly squeezes back with just enough pressure that I know he doesn't want me to go. Even as he slumbers, he doesn't want me to leave him.

And I did tell him I would stay.

His bed is small, but I'm small myself, and there's just enough room for me to join him. I brush his hair back from his forehead and tickle my fingers over his scar. If I could, I would take away his pain.

Only… I can do exactly that.

I'm tempted, sorely tempted, but I can't. I won't. Not without permission. To take from him anything, even pain, without first being asked would be a violation, and I won't do that to him. He deserves to have the choice.

Still, my heart aches for him. Rob's lost so much more than I have, and I wish I could help him. I wish he could see his parents again.

If only my dad was an angel instead of a demon! Can angels teleport? I believe so, and then, as a half-angel, I could teleport to Heaven. At the very least, I could see his parents and deliver messages to Robb. I'm not sure I would be able to transport him to Heaven with me, but wouldn't that be amazing? But there's no way that they went to Hell. I'm sure of it. They're in Heaven. At least the rest of his family is together, waiting for the day, hopefully decades upon decades away, when Robb will die of old age and can be reunited with them.

Eventually, I must have nodded off because I sense a slight change in Robb's breathing, and that's enough to jar me awake. I pull back, my hand falling on his chest, and I can feel his heartbeat. It's slow, slower than most peoples would be, but then again, human athletes have slower heartbeats than non-athletes, and werewolf heartbeats tend to be even slower than human athletes.

His heartbeat is a little irregular, I notice as I lie back down, resting my head on his chest. With a groan, he turns toward me and kisses the top of my head.

"What time is it?" he mumbles.

"Not sure."

A soft laugh rumbles through his chest. "Do you want to go look?"

"No." I hug him. "I don't want to move."

He laughs again, and his arms circle around me. The hug isn't all that tight, almost as if he's afraid to squeeze me, as if I'm the one who

had fought in two battles instead of him.

Again, I draw back and gaze out the window. I left it open. Whoops.

"It looks like it's well past morning."

"We slept a good while then." His lips quirk into that crooked smile of his that makes my heart flutter.

"Time for breakfast," I announce.

He groans. "Class—"

"Don't you dare worry about class," I tell him. "You aren't going."

"Is that an order?"

"Yes," I retort.

He just stares at me with his sky-blue eyes. They're glowing more than normal this morning, and they are so bright and full of life.

But there's also a haunted aura to him that makes me swallow hard.

"Robb, have you healed entirely?" I ask, careful to frame my question so he won't feel insulted.

"Most of the way," he admits.

"Is there anything you need from me?"

"Just for you to stay with me."

"And risk angering my professors." I gasp as if horrified.

"Please. The professors love you."

It should come out teasing, but there's a note of urgency in his words that makes me worried all over again. He doesn't want to be left alone. Is he afraid Roald or Wyatt—or Roald *and* Wyatt—will come for him?

"I'll stay," I say for a third time. "You don't have to worry about that, but I still want that date. Breakfast now instead of dinner. Where do you want to go?"

"You can pick."

I grin, ease him to sit up, and hold his hands up to my throat. "Do you want to get changed first, or can we leave now?"

He glances down at his clothes. Although wrinkled from sleep, they're clean. "Leave now, I guess," he murmurs.

Immediately, I teleport us to Cinnamon Crunch. Once we're there, he starts to laugh.

"Am I predictable?" I ask.

"Yes, but I don't mind. Not at all."

A different fairy takes our order this time around, and Robb has a bit more color to his face the more he eats. I insist on him eating his fill, and he puts food away like there's no tomorrow.

As we wait for dessert to be brought out—yes, I insist on dessert too—I grin at Robb. "Are you feeling up for a race afterward?"

He groans. "After eating all of this food?"

I try to eye him discreetly as I attempt to discern the reason behind his refusal. Is the food excuse legit, or does he have another reason for declining?

"All right, fine. Tell me the one place you want to go to if money or distance wasn't an object."

He shrugs. "Cinnamon Crunch."

"Because that's where I am?" I ask.

"Yup."

"Man, we should head to the dentist after here," I tease. "Too sickeningly sweet for me."

He winks at me.

Dessert arrives, and I let him have first crack at them.

"What about you?" he asks around a mouthful. He swallows. "Where do you want to go?"

"I would've liked to have taken you to a place that I used to go to all the time as a girl, but there's no point now."

"Why not?"

"It's broken."

"Broken?" He leans back, appraising me. "Sounds like there's a story there."

I stifle a laugh. "Actually, you've already been there."

"Wait. I have?"

I nod, but I don't give him any more hints.

Slowly, realization dawns, and his eyes glow even more. "That treehouse?"

I nod. "I used to always feel happy there. I guess that's why I chose that spot to teleport, but I hadn't been in there since I was eight? Nine? Something like that. A great deal lighter, and only with one person…"

"I'm sorry we broke your happy place."

I shrug one shoulder. "I have a new happy place."

"Oh, yeah? Now who's the one being sickeningly sweet?"

I bite my lower lip. When's the last time I felt this happy?

Never. The answer is never.

Once we finish eating, we wipe our hands to get all of the cinnamon off. I pay, and we stroll outside, hand in hand.

"Ready?" I murmur.

He nods, and I whisk us away to an isolated beach. Mom brought me here once. It's a beach on an island that no one goes to, an island so small you can walk the length of it in one day, and that's where Robb and I spend the rest of the day. We sunbath, play in the water, splash each other, collect seashells, make sand wolves…

It's a perfect day even if Robb does seem a bit tired and out of sorts. He doesn't stop smiling, though, and he never complains, and

I'm falling for him even more.

Robb makes me happy. For now, that's enough.

But I do want to know what my dad is up to. By the moon, I want to know what my mom is up to as well, but for now, Robb is all I need.

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Chapter 28

Bellanore

When we return, it's late. Robb insists that I don't need to spend the night with him again. I want to, though, but I don't push it. The last thing I want is to seem overbearing and pushy. We spent the entire day together. We don't have to be together twenty-four seven.

The moment I set foot in the castle with my room, Ellamaria races toward me.

"What is going on?" she hisses as she wraps her arm around my waist, dragging me along to her room.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you picked a fight with Wyatt, didn't you?"

"He deserved it, and I can't even remember for sure who started it. I mean, he came up to me, with his insults and all of that, so—"

"But you two fought."

"Yes."

"And then what happened?"

I cross my arm as she shuts the door. This feels like an inquisition, and I don't care for that.

"How do you know I fought him but not what happens next?" I ask suspiciously.

She lifts her chin. "Just tell me."

"Robb came," I mumble. "They fought. How… How badly hurt is Wyatt?"

"A broken arm, cracked ribs… He should be fine in a few days."

"Wish it would've been worse," I mumble.

Ellamaria flinches.

"Oh, come now. He's tormented me for how long, and you're going to judge me for appreciating that he was put in his place?"

"I'm just wondering what's going to be next," she says. "Robb's been getting into a lot of fights lately."

"He fought Wyatt to stand up for me," I protest.

"No, I know. I get that, and it's sweet, but if he keeps this up, he's going to get himself expelled."

My stomach churns. He's the best part about Moonstone Academy. I can't imagine going here without him.

"I just don't want you or Robb to get hurt," Ellamaria continues.

"Ah, so you're Team Robb now?" I tease.

"Yes. No. I'm Team Bellanore. Team whatever makes Bellanore happy."

"Then you are Team Robb because he does make me happy."

"Good." But Ellamaria doesn't seem happy. If anything, she looks downright worried, maybe even scared.

"What aren't you telling me?" I ask.

"You teleported off campus, didn't you?" she asks.

"Maybe," I say carefully. "Why would it matter if I did?"

"The lockdown is real." Ellamaria bites her lower lip. "Others are already trying to see if they can find a way around it. The werewolves are all on edge, and I don't know what they're planning. I can't tell."

"Whatever it is, I'm sure it's not anything good, and if they're trying to get around the lockdown, then hopefully it's related to the vampires."

Ellamaria nods miserably. "That's my guess too, but I don't think we should get involved."

"Why not?" I ask sharply.

She glances away.

"What is it?" I demand.

"Wyatt's really not happy about the stunt you and Robb pulled," she mumbles.

"What about it?"

"Aren't you related to a vampire?"

"Yes. Distant cousin."

"Does the cousin attend Blood Haven?"

"Yes." I swallow hard. "They aren't threatening her, are they? Planning to go after her just to hurt me? I barely know her!"

"I don't know, but I did hear people talking about you and you being a vampire lover and vampires being demons and all of that."

"That's absurd," I fume. "Okay. You're right. We shouldn't get involved."

My best friend narrows her eyes at me. "Don't you dare try to pull that," she snaps.

"Pull what?" I ask innocently.

"You don't think *we* should get involved, but you just mean that I shouldn't. If you're going to—"

"Ellamaria, it's bad enough that we're best friends."

"How is that a bad thing?" she grumbles.

"Because. They're targeting Romelia right now, but what if they can't get to Blood Haven? They'll have to pick another target, an

easier target, a werewolf target. They could change and alter course and make you the next target instead. The sooner you distance yourself from me, the better."

"No way," she says flatly. "You're a member of the Ember pack too, and I won't leave you."

"If my mom did, then you can," I say, my tone just as flat.

Ellamaria wrinkles her nose. "You didn't just say that."

"I not only said it. I meant it. Please. I'm asking you to be a friend to me and just let me handle all of this."

"You can't," she protests. "Not alone."

"I can and I will. Watch me."

Ellamaria grimaces and clenches and unclenches her fists.

My lips quirk. "What are you going to do? Fight me so that I can't stop the other werewolves?"

"A bit ironic, I know, but yes, I'm debating just that," she says with a dark laugh. "Bellanore, you take on too much."

"I take on just enough. I mean, I know what I'm doing."

"Do you?" she questions softly.

I nod firmly.

She hesitates. "Where were you this entire time?"

"I thought it might be prudent for Robb and me to disappear for a bit."

Ellamaria lifts her eyebrows. "And last night?"

"What about it?"

"You didn't sleep here."

"I was with Robb."

She blinks a few times, her jaw dropped.

"Nothing like that happened," I say, my cheeks growing warm. "He didn't want to be alone, and I wasn't going to leave him."

"The more you talk about him, the more I like him," she says begrudgingly.

I can't help laughing. "You act as if that's a bad thing."

"Put yourself in my position. You want me to stop being your friend, and you're growing super close to your boyfriend super fast."

"He's not replacing you."

"'Course not! I'm irreplaceable!"

We laugh, and I give her a quick hug.

"Just promise me you'll be careful," Ellamaria says. "It's taking everything in me to not follow you out of here."

I burst out laughing. "It's not as if I'm your alpha."

"I know, but it also…" The strangest expression crosses over her face. She shakes her head, and some of her confusion lifts. "Go on, but be smart. Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

I wink, and I leave the castle.

It's one thing to sense sins, but as I stalk around the campus, I swear I can almost smell the growing tension. It's a bitter smell that makes my stomach churn, and it leads me to a small clearing on the side of the campus closest to Silver Ironwoods, which rests between Moonstone and Blood Haven, albeit closer to the werewolf side.

The werewolves gathered there are ones I mostly don't recognize, but one does stick out. Pablo Starfell.

I go to head toward him when another werewolf shifts to stand in front of me. I look up and up and up to see his face.

"What are you doing here?" he rumbles.

"I could ask you all the same thing," I say sweetly. "I saw a few guards nearby along the perimeter. If this is a party, we might want to keep it down, so they don't bust us."

He glances over his shoulders at the werewolves behind us and starts to laugh. "You think the guards here don't want this?"

"Want what?" I ask innocently.

"They're werewolves too. They hate vampires too." The werewolf stalks toward me. "Do you?"

"Do I what?" I ask.

"Hate vampires."

"I hate clichés. I also have a strong opinion about the Oxford comma. Do you? I mean, without it, things can become really confusing. Who wants to imagine JFK and Stalin as—"

"You talk too much," the werewolf rambles.

"And I should care about your opinion of me when I don't even know your name?" I cross my arms.

"You should care very much because if you aren't with us, you're against us, and we all have reason to believe—"

"You know me so well, huh? Then you should know where I stand."

"You stand alone," a female says from behind me.

I stiffen. Nia. Of course the witch of a werewolf would be here. Hmm. A witch werewolf. Are there any? That would be something.

I don't dare turn away from the male werewolf in front of me even though I don't relish having my back toward Nia. I don't trust her, and knowing she's involved with this crew makes me even more anxious. That's the thing about numbers. There really is safety in numbers, and I have no one else here on my side. They have the number advantage.

But I'm not just a werewolf. I'm a demon too, and I know how to take care of myself. They will *not* get the upper hand on me.

But to ensure that end, I need to talk to them. This is a battle of brains, not brawn.

It takes everything in me to just stand there, silent, and wait for Nia to make her next move.

She stalks toward me, slowly coming around to stand near the male werewolf. They stand close together without touching. None of her normal crew is around as far as I can tell. None of the bullies are here either, but somehow, that doesn't make me feel any better about my chances.

"You're a half-demon. You're related to one of the vampires, aren't you?" Nia asks in a tone that suggests she already knows that answer. "Vampires are demons. Are you on their side?"

"I'm not alone," I say, purposely ignoring her question in favor of correcting her earlier point.

Nia makes a show of glancing around. "I don't see anyone here who will stand with you."

"Maybe I don't need them."

Nia smirks. "A werewolf who prefers isolation to a pack. Doesn't strike me as a smart werewolf."

"Or a strong one," the male says.

"More like a cunning one," I say. "I think about the future, and I plan. You want to go ahead and do what exactly? Raid Blood Haven? Fight the vampires? Kill one? What will that do? Start a war. You might think you want that—"

"Don't try to tell us what we think we want," the male hisses.

"He's right," Nia says idly. "We know what we want. We'll go there, and we'll do what we want."

"That so? What makes you think you'll win? I hate to break it to you, but vampires are faster than werewolves."

Nia smirks and nudges the male. Those around them laugh.

"We have a way of evening things out," he says.

"That so?" I ask, and as discreetly as I can, I inhale. A vaguely familiar scent lingers on the air, something I've smelled exactly sixteen times before.

Mystic Twilight.

Nia tilts her head to the side. "You couldn't stop us if you tried."

She claps her hands, and each of the werewolves holds up a cup. They all go to drink.

Before I can think twice, I teleport again and again and again, knocking each cup to the ground before any of them can drink, moving so fast I rival a vampire with their great speed.

Last of all, I knock down the male's, considering I did Nia first. I'm so dizzy and don't know which way is up or down, but it's done.

Nia scowls, staring at her cup on the ground, at his, glancing back to see all of the other cups on the ground, the grass all stained with the spilled Mystic Twilight.

I give them a huge smile. "What was that about evening things?" I ask sweetly. "You want to fight the vampires? Do it with honor. Don't

you dare abuse Mystic Twilight. Your heart will—"

"That's a lie," Nia snarls. She inhales deeply and reassumes her normally cool attitude. "It's a mistruth that the elders tell us so that we will be kept in check and not overthrow them, but we hold the power. The Mystic Twilight—"

"Your mom makes it, doesn't she?" I ask idly, tapping a finger to my cheek. "I wonder how the alpha of the Forge pack would feel knowing that she's allowing her daughter to supply werewolf teenagers with as much Mystic Twilight as they like. For that matter, I wonder how Headmaster Virgil Thorn will appreciate knowing that it's being consumed on campus."

I pointedly stare at the grass, at the evidence soaking into the soil, evidence they can't destroy. Slowly, the werewolves begin to walk away until only the male, Nia, and I remain, and then even he wanders off.

"You might've stopped us this time," Nia says, "but you haven't changed our minds. If anything, you just supplanted yourself as the one target we can practice on. You better watch your back, Bellanore."

"I don't care for threats."

"And I don't care for you."

She stalks off, and I blow out a breath I didn't realize I was holding. Nia won't back down, and honestly, neither will I.

I pull out my phone. "Hi, yes, I need to speak to the alpha of the Forge pack. Tell him it's Ronath's daughter on the line."

Yes, I'm tattling, and you can bet by the light of the moon that I'm going to call the headmaster too.

I'm not alone. I might not have allies, but I do know how to pull strings.

I am a half-demon after all, and I will do whatever it takes to ensure war doesn't happen.

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Chapter 29

Robb

Morning comes, and with it, I can't help it. I can't hide it much more. The agony of the curse is so strong that I don't know if it's possible for me to get out of bed.

But I am stubborn. I'm part bull in that instance, and I refuse to go down. There are a hundred thousand things I could've done differently. I could've tried harder to find the one who could break the curse, but I didn't. Maybe I have survivor's guilt. Maybe a part of me wanted to die because why did I get extra time to live when my entire pack died? It's not fair. It's not right.

Yes, I killed the drow, but I'm cursed now. The curse will kill me. I will die, and the Alines will be no more. So many packs have died out throughout the centuries, and the Alines will become nothing more than a statistic.

My chest aches as I roll out of bed. Being with Bellanore gave me strength that I didn't think I could still possess, but I'm without her now. I can barely walk. Even so, I drag myself across campus and head into class.

Professor Rockhound is never in a good mood, and he has a foul temperament today.

"Mr. Aline," he snaps.

"Yes, sir."

"Why don't you demonstrate the forcross grip to the class."

I slowly nod, but I don't stand.

"Mr. Aline?"

With a huff, I grip my desk and use it for balance to stand. I stumble as I make my way to the front of the classroom. There's a huge stone granite pole in the front of the classroom, and I'm meant to use it to show the grip, but I can't. My body feels like everything inside has melted. It's as if I have no bones, nothing to hold me upright.

"Mr. Aline, have you been indulging in a little extra sauce this morning?" Professor Rockhound asks.

The class titters with laughter.

I can barely lift my head to look at him.

"Are you sick?" Professor Rockhound asks in a lower tone for my ears only.

"You… You could say that," I mumble. "I…"

"You look ready to collapse. If you fall on me, you fail."

The class howls with laughter. Honestly, the joke isn't that funny. They're laughing at my expense. They don't care about me, and I can't say I blame them. The rough crowd isn't exactly popular, and while they adopted me, I didn't discourage them enough. They haven't helped to bolster my reputation with the rest of the students. No one truly knows me.

Except for Bellanore.

If she knew about the curse, would she care? Would she help me?

Of course not. Breaking the curse… She would never go for that.

But I would like for her to be there when the curse ends. When my life ends.

At least then, I might be able to have some peace before I go to Hell.

"You disgust me," Professor Rockhound says loudly, but his tone doesn't have the same level of contempt as it normally does. "Leave my class until you are capable of doing anything and everything that is asked of you."

I nod dully and make my way to the door, shuffling my feet, trying not to fall. The class murmurs and shouts a few insults my way, but I don't care.

When I reach the doorway, I grab it and glower at the ones I think yelled the insults. They have the decency to look not only ashamed but also a little scared, especially when I tap a finger near my scar, a not-so-subtle reminder that I am strong and capable of taking a hit and willing to give one back.

The trek back to my room is slow, but I manage to make it there only after falling three times. I've spent so much time here lately, mostly because I don't want to sleep outdoors anymore. I need the softness of the bed, although I do miss the stars and the moon and their light.

The bed calls to me now, but I ignore it in favor of the trunk at the foot of my bed. I collapse, falling to my knees, and my fingers tremble as I try to turn the numbers to open the lock. Finally, it hinges, and I fling the chest open.

Inside are several items that hold a lot of meaning to me.

The first is a dress that Mom wore all the time. Every time she put it on, Dad always said it was his favorite. It always made her smile, which made Dad smile.

Then, there's the hat Dad wore. He liked to pretend it was the 1940s or something, but it gave him character. Dad was a fighter. All werewolves are, but he was also a lover too. He was a romantic, and that's why Mom and Dad made a perfect pair.

Rickard, ah, Rickard. I have a bat that was his. Rickard used to love to play baseball. He would have me pitch to him, but I was terrible. Either I whipped a ball clear off the plate, or else it would be a lazy pitch right down the middle that he would easily crush. I had no control whatsoever, and no matter how much he yelled at me and tried to correct my stance or fingers, I just couldn't get it.

I wish I practiced more for his sake.

Even though I know I should stop there, I don't. I empty out the next times—a stake, a crossbow, a pistol, a shotgun, an axe, an assortment of knives and daggers.

Yes, I have a large array of weapons and also holsters and belts to be able to attach all of them to my person at the same time.

Not that long ago, I came to the realization that I've always dealt with everything that came before. No matter what it was, I would adapt. I would do what needed to be done and moved on.

I thought then that I needed to deal with everything now too.

So far, I haven't. I've been pretending that I'm just a normal werewolf with a normal werewolf girlfriend.

But nothing about my life is normal.

By the moon, I don't even have a normal werewolf girlfriend.

Not that I would have it any other way. Bellanore is amazing. She's perfect. Not just because she's gorgeous. Because of her strength… Her intelligence… Her giggles…

She deserves someone who can appreciate her, someone who can be there for her no matter what. Someone who her dad will approve of.

There's no way her dad would approve of me, not if I survive long enough to meet him because that would mean breaking the curse, and that her dad will not appreciate at all. In fact, her dad will most likely kill me, so it's all a moot point.

All of it.

My relationship with Bellanore has to end.

It never should've started in the first place.

Why? Why did I cave? Why did I date her? Kiss her? Fall for her?

Because I was lonely. She filled a void.

No. That's not it at all. Yes, of course I'm lonely. I have no pack, but that's not why I wanted to spend time with her. She's the reason I couldn't just accept my fate. She's the reason why I've put off trying to end the curse, and now, I don't have the strength to.

But I am going to try now. I am. For her. I don't want to leave her.

She means far too much to me.

I'm selfish. So utterly selfish. I never should've gone after her, but I did, and now I need her. I need her in my life. I need my life to not end as quickly as it's going to.

So, yes, I'll die in the process of ending the curse. It'll mean that I won't have that peaceful death with Bellanore at my side, but I don't deserve that anyhow.

The curse won't claim me because I'll die on my terms. I'll fight to the bitter end. When I attacked the drow, I thought he would kill me too. I figured my life was over. I had nothing left to lose.

But I did it. I killed her and earned my scar.

A werewolf versus a drow is a much more evenly matched fight than a werewolf versus a demon. I have no idea what to expect except that I will lose. I'll die. I'm certain of it.

That won't stop me. I'll fight.

I stand. My legs wobble a bit, my knees threatening to give out, but slowly, they stop shaking. I bend over and pick up the axe. My thumb runs down the blade, splitting my skin. A thick scarlet ribbon of blood leaks out, and I put my thumb in my mouth.

The axe is heavy, heavier than I remember. Maybe it's because I'm weaker.

After taking two steps back, I swing a few times. The axe nearly causes me to lose my balance. Maybe it's not a good idea.

The bat feels much more familiar in my hand even though Rickard hardly ever threw a ball for me to hit. It swings through the air so hard that I can hear it. Yes, I'll bring this, although honestly, what good will a bat do in a battle against a demon?

The knives and daggers are all easy to use, and I start to attach them to my body. In my boots, up my sleeves, where they'll be easy to reach and I won't endanger myself when I grab them.

The guns… the shotgun…

The enormity of what I want to accomplish weighs me down, and I close the lid of the trunk and lean against it before slumping down and sitting on top. I won't survive this. By the moon, I still don't even know where the demon is that I would need to face to break the curse. I'm a mess. A complete and utter mess.

Why am I not terrified out of my mind?

Except I am. The thought of leaving Bellanore terrifies me.

She's my peace.

She's my pack.

Maybe not in truth, but that's how it feels. Without her, I have nothing.

But I'm not nothing.

I'm more than my curse.

And I will die, yes, but I'll die fighting rather than just giving up.

Dad, the romantic, would've died alongside Mom, holding her hand. That actually is how they died.

But that's not me. I'm a fighter first, lover second.

And maybe that's wrong, but it's right for me, and I will do this.

I will fight the curse. In the end, it'll break me, kill me, but I'll fight it the best I can.

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Chapter 30

Bellanore

The sheer satisfaction that I feel at having at least stalled the growing conflict and animosity between the werewolves and vampires has me feeling like I'm walking on air. I've made a difference. I acted like an alpha, and the werewolves had no choice but to obey. Okay, they didn't choose to listen to me, so that's not being an alpha, but the end result is the same.

The headmaster receives an anonymous tip after I spoke with the alpha of the Forge pack. The alpha actually listened to me, and I'm sure name-dropping my demon dad helped with that, but hey, a werewolf's got to do what a werewolf's got to do when it comes to keeping the peace. I might be part-demon, but I don't want war. There's enough anger for me to draw on if I want to without the need for war.

Only after I spy the headmaster and a few professors head toward the spot do I teleport away. When I stand in front of my castle, a wave of dizziness washes over me. I've teleported far too many times, and I feel as weak and hopeless as I did the other day.

Of course, that makes me think of Robb, and a slow smile spreads across my face. When I stood before Nia and the werewolves, there was a moment when I feared for my life, and now that I can reflect back on that, I see things so much clearer now. I'm willing to admit to myself that I don't just have feelings for Robb.

I love him.

The only question is, do I tell him that?

Why shouldn't I? It's the truth after all. Yes, we haven't been dating that long, and yes, I wish he would open up to me more about his family, but I also understand that he needs time in order to sort through things. He needs to be able to come to terms with his loss. That can't be an easy process, and there's no time limit on grief.

But maybe learning that someone else loves him will help. Honestly, I don't see how my telling him that I love him can hurt at all. The worst-case scenario is that he doesn't say it back, but after he

wanted me to stay with him all night, there's no doubt in my mind that my declaration won't scare him away.

In fact, his asking me to stay is almost his way of saying without words that he loves me.

I'm too worn out to teleport to his room, so I walk there. The campus is like a ghost town. There are hardly any werewolves out and about, and that's all right by me. I've always liked to go for long walks at night, and I wish Robb was here beside me. It would be better to tell him under the light of the moon, I think. Yes, that would be perfect. If I didn't want to tell him right now, I would go and get a blanket, set up a picnic, maybe have some chocolate… I've been craving smores ever since Ellamaria mentioned them.

But I shove all of that aside and march to his castle, this time entering through the front door. Several werewolves should live here, but I only sense one heartbeat, and it belongs to the heart I heard against my ear not that long ago.

Robb.

I grin to myself. At least we'll have privacy.

There's a spiral staircase, and I climb it slowly, my hand on the railing. When I reach the top, I use my nose to lead me to his room. My knuckles knock against the smooth wood of his door.

There's a bit of rustling, and then Robb calls out, "Come in."

I suck in a deep breath and enter to find Robb sitting on a trunk at the foot of his bed. His face is a bit pale again. Maybe he hasn't recovered fully yet from the fight, but he should've by now. Why hasn't he?

I swallow back my worries and shut the door behind me.

"Bellanore," he says, and his voice sounds pained.

"Robb." I can't help but smile at the joy in my voice.

His eyes soften. He has to hear it too.

I hold out my hand, and he stands and takes it. We stand there, arm's length apart, just staring. I should talk. Say what I came to say, but I just want to soak in this moment. He's so handsome and brave and strong. He's a werewolf through and through. Loyal to the point of fighting for me as if I'm his wife already.

Did I really just think that?

I mean, that's crazy.

His family is dead. Not his pack.

But maybe… maybe his pack would be willing to take me in, considering my mom turned ours against me.

The thought makes my heart skip a beat, and he squeezes my hand.

"You look like you're troubled," Robb finally says.

"No." I laugh and shake my head. "I'm not troubled at all. The

opposite in fact. I'm better than I've been in a long time, maybe forever."

"I'm glad to hear it. Why's that? What did you do?" he teases.

"Oh!" I put my other hand to my chest. "I'm wounded! What makes you think I did something?"

"Did you?"

"Yes, actually. I stopped Nia and a bunch of werewolves from sneaking off campus to go to Blood Haven. She had Mystic Twilight. She was supplying them all with it, but I spilled every last drop of it out of their cups. She didn't have any more on her. I would've been able to smell it, and I might've made a mortal enemy of her because I ratted her out to her alpha and to the headmaster, but what she was doing can't be allowed to stand."

"You took on a huge risk," Robb says.

"Are you upset that I did that?"

"I just wish you hadn't done it alone."

I squeeze his hand. "I'm touched that you worry about me, but you need to trust me. I know my limits."

"Do you?"

It's a loaded question, and he knows it.

"All right. Fine. I know my werewolf limits. I'm still working out my demonic ones."

"And how did you spill every last drop?"

"By teleporting a lot."

"No wonder you look pale." He tilts his head to the side. "Although your cheeks are a bit rosy."

I laugh and turn to the side.

He cups my face and makes me look at him. "I do trust you," he murmurs.

My heart skips so many beats that I grow faint. "I trust you too."

Now. Now is the time.

"Do you want anything to eat?" Robb asks before I have the chance to work up the nerve to tell him how I feel.

"I want to talk to you," I say slowly.

"About what? What you want to eat?" he jokes.

"No, about something more important than that."

"Really? Because I thought there aren't much more important things than chocolate."

He squeezes my hand before releasing it and heading over to his desk. From the top drawer, he removes a candy bar.

That werewolf really is too much.

Robb crosses back over to me and pushes the candy bar into my hand. "You look like you need a pick-me-up."

"I don't."

“The sugar will help maybe after using up so much energy.” He rocks back and forth on his heels.

“Why are you being so insistent?” I ask suspiciously. “You don’t think I’m cranky, do you?”

He chuckles. “No, Bellanore. I just got that candy bar for you. I want you to enjoy it.”

I can’t deny him, and I unwrap the bar. The first bite of chocolatey nutty goodness has me closing my eyes and moaning.

“You like, huh?” Robb asks smugly.

I open my eyes. “Yes.”

I hold it out, and he breaks off a piece, and we eat in silence. Once we’re done, I throw out the wrapper in the trashcan tucked under his desk before taking my original position and holding his hand again.

“Rob, I love you,” I blurt out.

He blinks a few times, his lips parting.

I wait and wait and wait.

He says nothing.

“You don’t have to say it back,” I add, feeling like a fool. “I don’t expect you to. I just… I wanted you to know. My feelings. I wanted you to know my feelings.”

Robb drops my hand, takes a step back, and gives me a look that I can’t decipher at all.

Did I just screw everything up? I didn’t think there was a con to my telling him, but clearly, this—whatever this is—is a downside I didn’t foresee.

Before I can potentially ruin things further, something happens. We aren’t the only two in the room. A demon has teleported into the room and stands directly in front of Robb.

Instinctively, I step between them, holding out an arm to protect Robb. I’m sure he doesn’t care for that, but I’m not worried about that right now.

Before I can demand to know who the demon is and what he wants, the demon growls, showing off his pointed teeth. “When will the deed be done?” he utters in a voice that makes my skin crawl.

“Deed? What deed?” I glance over my shoulder at Robb. His face is white, so very pale, and he sways slightly on his feet.

“You do not need to concern yourself with this,” Robb says. His voice is tight.

My nostrils flare, and I set back my shoulders, eyeing the demon. “What deed? Who are you? What do you want from us?”

“Not from you. From him. Robb Aline.” The demon’s smile is—in a word—demonic. “Robb Aline is to kill a demon.”

It feels as if the floor has opened up, and I’m falling.

“Kill…” I repeat, mumbling the word.

“Not just any demon,” the hateful creatures continues, clearly delighting in this. “Ronath is to die by Robb’s hand.”

Robb.

Ronath.

My boyfriend is supposed to kill my dad.

How? Why?

I gape at the demon, who just continues to stare at Robb. Then, his gaze falls to the trunk. He snorts a laugh and disappears.

And all I can think about is how that demon just said that my boyfriend is to kill my dad.

Robb’s played me this entire time. I’m nothing but a fool, a means to an end, and to think I just confessed to him that I loved him.

No wonder he couldn’t say it back to me.

I swallow hard. “I’m sure you think you can explain, but I… I need to go.”

“You know who Ronath is,” Robb says slowly.

I whirl around to face him.

The shock on his features is genuine. His voice cracks as he says, “Ronath is your dad.”

“Yes.”

Robb nods slowly. "Well, you did say that your dad might want to kill me."

My slap is so hard that it stings my hand worse than a thousand bee stings.

“Don’t you dare come near me ever again, and if you even think about going after my dad…” I stalk closer to him and jab a finger at his chest. “I will handle you myself.”

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Moonstone Academy Year Two

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Chapter 1

Bellanore

My boyfriend is supposed to kill my dad.

I don't know what he's caught up in, but a demon just said that Robb Aline has to kill Ronath.

My dad.

My demon dad.

Who I also don't know what he's caught up in either, but that doesn't mean I'm going to allow Robb to just go ahead and attack my dad.

Because that's all it would be. My dad isn't going to let a teenage werewolf kill him. My dad's a demon. I don't even think I could take Dad on myself, and I'm half-demon, half-werewolf.

"Don't you dare come near me ever again, and if you even think about going after my dad…" I stalk closer to him and jab a finger at his chest. "I will handle you myself."

Robb just gapes at me. He's still in shock. Not over the fact that he has to kill a demon. No, he already knew that. He just didn't realize until now that the demon he's supposed to kill for whatever reason is my dad.

I take one good long look at him, at his black hair that sweeps to cover his forehead, brushed off to the side so that it won't hang in his eyes. His eyes are what get me every time. They're sky blue, and they glow, just like mine do.

I also thought my eyes glowed because of my demonic blood. Why do his eyes glow? Robb's not holding another secret from me, is he?

Probably.

There's also the scar over his left eye, the scar he obtained from killing a drow.

A drow who had killed his parents and his brother.

I swallow hard. "I mean it. Don't come near me again."

My long, mostly dark strands of hair flutter around me like a cloak as I turn to leave.

"I swear I didn't know he was your dad," he mumbles.

I whirl back around and glower at him. “As if that makes it any better!”

“I haven’t gone after him,” he says.

My gaze lands on the trunk. The demon who came to warn Robb that the deed needed to be done had laughed at it for some reason.

My knees collapse, and I throw it open even though I have no business doing that. The items inside make me pause. A dress? A hat? But then I spy some weapons, and I understand all too well why the demon laughed.

None of this will help to kill Dad.

My heart aches, and I grip the side of the trunk, my head hanging there. Robb played me. He got close to me to get close to his mark.

No. His shock at learning Ronath, the demon he’s to kill, is my dad had been the truth. I can sense sins, including lies. It’s one of my demonic abilities. Ironically enough, it’s an ability my dad doesn’t have.

“Yet,” I snap as I lift my head. “You haven’t gone after him yet. You haven’t because you don’t know how to kill a demon, do you?”

He says nothing.

“You want to kill a demon.” I bark a bitter laugh, look at the bat, and laugh all over again. “Or do you have a death wish? Is that it? You want to go after my dad and have him kill you?”

“I swear I didn’t know he was your dad, Bellanore,” he says desperately. “You have to—”

“You don’t get to tell me what I have to do,” I spit out. I stand and turn on him. “Not even before all of this. You never get to tell me what to do.”

He swallows hard. He’s pale, so very pale, and he looks like he’s about ready to collapse.

There’s something he’s hiding from me. Something big.

And a part of me can’t get that dress out of my head. Was it his mom’s? Is that why he has it? Why else would he have a dress?

“I didn’t… Aren’t there two other werewolf students here who have demons for a parent? I was told a couple—”

“Okay, first of all, couple means two, not three, and second of all, whoever told you that is wrong. I’m the only one.” I eye him. “You came to the academy because you knew at least one werewolf-demon hybrid came here. You knew that his or her father was the one you’re to kill.”

“Yes,” he says miserably. “I didn’t want to, though. I never once asked you how to kill a demon, did I? If anyone would know, you would.”

“I don’t understand. Why do you need to kill a demon? Why does that demon want you to kill my dad?”

“I don’t exactly ask demons questions,” he mumbles.

“You asked me questions.”

“Yes, well…”

“I’m not a demon?” My nostrils flare. The anger boiling inside of me is enough to force me to accept that I truly am a descendant of a demon. Not that I’ve ever had an issue with it. I’ve always accepted both halves to myself.

Even if my pack won’t accept me.

A werewolf without a pack. It’s not something that can be. A lone werewolf will die. My best friend, Ellamaria, is in my mother’s pack, in what should be my pack. She stands by me, and that’s enough to keep me from going insane or dying. If not for her, it’s possible that my demonic side would save me.

Or maybe my wolf will one day be lost to me.

I can’t bear to think about that, but I also don’t want to think about a world without my dad. Yes, he’s a demon, and he’s done terrible things. I know that even if I don’t know the specifics of his activities. He had me use my lie-detection ability on one of his business partners, an imp named Draz.

I can still hear the imp’s words later on that same night.

“He’s weaving a tangled web. It’s not something you want to get involved in. You can trust me on that.”

The fear in his voice… It almost makes me want to believe him even if he is an imp in cahoots with a demon.

“Please, for your sake,” he said, “don’t look into what your dad is doing. Don’t look into it. Stop trying to find out. You won’t like what you’ll learn, and if he tries to rope you into it…” And then, he added, “I’m looking out for you,” before he looked over his shoulder, freaked out, and teleported away.

He’s afraid of my dad. My dad is into something really big, and maybe that’s why this other demon wants Dad dead.

“Why won’t that demon just go after Dad himself?” I mutter.

“That demon is… He’s the… He’s the reason…” Robb swallows hard. “The drow who killed my parents and my brother? He didn’t… He did it to gain favor with that demon.”

I gasp. “And now that demon is holding it over your head? Is he threatening the rest of your pack if you don’t do what he asks? You killed his underling. Of course he’s going to want you to step up and take that drow’s place.”

“Not exactly,” Robb mumbles. “There’s more.”

“I’m sure there’s a lot more,” I snap. “What is it?”

“The drow… he didn’t just kill my parents, my brother. He killed my entire pack.”

“You’re a lone wolf?”

He nods.

And I take in his appearance, the fact that he should've recovered from the fights already, how he seems so weak and frail despite his muscular frame, a frame that is slowly shrinking some…

Robb is… Is he dying?

I gape at him, unable to ask that question aloud, and then my phone starts to ring. Torn between confusion and fear, I yank it out of my pocket so harshly that it falls onto the floor. Caller ID alerts us to the fact that the caller is my dad.

"Maybe you shouldn't ignore him," Robb says.

I eye him and purse my lips. "You shouldn't tell me what to do."

"I didn't. I said maybe."

I know he did. I heard him, but I'm so confused and upset and torn. What am I supposed to do? Who am I to believe? The imp? Robb? My dad?

Honestly, when I was younger, I adored my dad. Ellamaria teased me that my favorite parent is my dad, and maybe that had been true at one point in time. Then, my mom abandoned me, and yes. Fine. I'll admit it. My dad was my only parent. He still is. I haven't seen my mom for far too long.

But lately, Dad's been scaring me. He tried to get me to walk through fire, but I can't do that! I'll burn! Fire terrifies me. It's Dad's fault that I have an irrational fear of fire. Not that he realizes it, but when I was five, I saw him walk through flames. Wanting to be like him, I lit a candle and tried to touch it, but I couldn't. I was afraid, and I got burned. For two years, I had nightmares about fire. If a tiny flame can burn me, how can I walk through fire?

It's simple. I can't. Demons might be made from fire, but I'm not. I'm not just a demon. I'm a werewolf, and they can burn.

"We aren't done," I inform Robb.

"I don't want us to be," he says simply, looking me in the eye for the first time since he learned who his target truly is.

And in his eyes, I see a world of pain and misery that I've never seen before in any person.

Shaken, I swallow hard, take a step back, and teleport to a wooded section of the campus on Moonstone Academy. My phone rings again, and I answer.

"Bellanore," Dad says in his rumbling voice. "I almost thought you weren't going to answer."

"I thought about not," I admit as I begin walking. I don't have a destination in mind, but I'm too amped up and anxious to stand around and do nothing.

"Why wouldn't you want to hear from me?"

"Maybe because I don't want to feel used and abused."

“What are you talking about?” Dad snaps.

I grit my teeth. “Why did you call, Dad?”

“Not to hear lip service from my daughter, I’ll tell you that much,” he bites.

I just smirk even though he can’t see me. “What do you want?”

“I want you to come home.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know if I like the idea of you being around so many werewolves.”

“Why’s that?” I ask. “The year’s almost over.”

“You need to spend more time with me. You need to start becoming my daughter again.”

“What exactly does that mean?” I ask. It feels as if he dumped a bucket of ice on me. I’m almost chilled straight down to the bone. “I’ve always been your daughter.”

He snorts. “You would run away in a second to be with your mother if she came sniffing around. Admit it. Even though I’ve been the one to stay here with you, the one to try to teach you about your heritage—”

“Don’t forget that some of my heritage is with the werewolves,” I say darkly. “That’s why I’m here. Don’t worry. I’m not afraid that you’ll abandon me like Mom did. I’m here because here is where I want to be, and if you want to teach me, you can try—”

“You need to learn how to walk through fire.”

“Why?” I blurt out. “Why do you want me to learn how to do that?”

“Don’t you see?” he hisses. “It’s about acceptance. It’s about listening. Respect.”

Devotion. That’s what it’s about. Devotion and loyalty. He wants me to have blind obedience and do whatever he asks of me.

“Walk through fire, and then what, Dad? What else will you ask of me? What else do you need me to do?” I challenge.

“You don’t trust me. My own daughter.”

“Do you trust me, Dad? No. You don’t. Let’s be real for a second, okay? If I were to ask if anyone would want you dead, would you tell me the truth?”

“I wouldn’t lie to you.”

“You know full well you can get away with a lie over the phone.”

“Is that so?”

I grit my teeth. He’s known that. I mean, it’s not new news.

“Would anyone want you dead?” I ask.

“Most likely.”

“Why?”

Silence.

When the quiet stretches for a solid two minutes, I shake my head and laugh. “Yeah, so you want me to trust you, but when I ask you a few questions, you won’t answer them. I mean, yeah, I guess a non-answer is better than a lie. Oh, wait. There is such a thing as a lie by omission… Someone wants you dead, but you won’t tell me. Are you afraid I’ll go after the person? Or are you worried I won’t have your back because you did something that gives that person a legit reason for wanting you dead?”

There’s nothing.

And then there’s a click.

Dad’s hung up on me.

I don’t trust him.

He doesn’t trust me.

I don’t trust Robb.

There’s so much distrust going on, and honestly, I don’t know what it’ll take to get to the bottom of it all.

Do I even want to try?

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Chapter 2

Robb

So much for my big plan to fight the curse. I always knew that in the end, it would break me, kill me, but I made the decision to fight it the best I could right before Bellanore showed up and laid that massive bombshell at my feet.

The demon I'm supposed to kill is her dad.

Yeah, that's not going to happen.

Seeing her rummage through my trunk, for her to look at the dress and side-eye it… This isn't how I wanted things to go down. I thought maybe I could bring her here, show her the dress, my dad's hat, Rickard's bat… I could tell her the full story about how my entire pack had been killed, not just my family.

Now, who knows if she'll be willing to listen.

"We aren't done," she said, but she doesn't mean us as a couple. As far as she's concerned, we're over.

I could see it in her eyes, her glowing green eyes. Those haunting orbs glow because of her demonic side. At least, that's my assumption. My eyes didn't always glow. That started with the curse.

I'm going to die with my eyes still glowing. Will my death make that glow leave? I won't ever know the truth to that.

I'm beside myself, and I don't know what to do. I know more about the demon I'm supposed to fight, but that's not saying much. How can I even think about going up against Bellanore's dad? He'll want to kill me just because I'm dating his daughter.

Dated. I dated his daughter.

Bellanore Shade. I had no idea the demon was Ronath Shade. Even when I looked him up on supes.com, I hadn't learned his last name. Everywhere, he's just known as Ronath. There aren't any pictures of him, so I don't know what he looks like. Does he have black hair like his daughter? Does he also have a few white strands? Or maybe she favors her mom, the one she wished died instead of my mom.

I'm sure she doesn't feel that way anymore, now that she suspects I only got close to her because of her demonic side so I can try to

what… learn about demons and their weaknesses? Yes, I asked her about her demonic abilities, but that's because I'm interested in her. I'm interested in Bellanore. She gave me a reason to want to fight the curse in the first place. She gave me a reason to want to live, to keep breathing.

The curse weighs heavy on me. I didn't need to know from Zaun that my clock is ticking. My wolf is dying. I'm dying. The only way Zaun will save me is if I do his bidding.

A lone wolf dies. Wolves need their packs.

A normal werewolf would be able to join another pack potentially after being kicked out of their pack, but I'm not a normal werewolf. I can't do that, and even though I consider Bellanore my pack, she no longer feels the same. It's possible she might've before, but not now. Not anymore. My past has caught up to me.

Loud banging at my door has me jumping to my feet. A wave of dizziness washes over me. It can't be Bellanore. She won't want anything to do with me, but that knock sounds desperate.

Before I can decide if I want to open the door, it flings open wide enough to hit against the wall. I inhale sharply as Roald Jagger strolls in.

My upper lip curls back in a snarl. We've butted heads more than a few times already, and I'm not interested in dealing with him and his nonsense right now or ever again for that matter.

"Leave," I tell him.

"Oh, am I not welcome here?" Roald mocks. "Ask me if I care what you think."

"You really want to have a go at me again?" I ask.

"I don't see your little demonic girlfriend hanging about. She won't be…" He pauses and tilts his head to the side. "You winced when I… Did she drop your pathetic—"

"You better shut your trap right now," I snap.

"Your bark is worse than your bite," Roald says haughtily, lifting his chin. "Come on. Let's settle this once and for all."

"You want to fight me? Why?" I demand. "What's the point?"

"You think you're so tough. That scar doesn't prove anything. I bet you gave it to yourself."

"Yes, because people always claw themselves to the point of nearly gouging out their eyes." I roll them. It always feels a bit strange when I do that because the scar puckers some from the movement.

Roald spreads his legs apart, bending his knees slightly, getting into a fighting stance. He seriously wants to do this here? Now?

"You didn't answer me," I say. "Did you forget the question already? Why do you want to fight me?"

He narrows his gray eyes. "You dishonored one of mine. That's the

same as dishonoring me."

"Dishonoring… You do realize that Nia is going to claw you in the back, don't you?"

"That's what you would do, not her. You don't understand. We're a pack."

"You are no leader."

"You take that back," he roars.

I smirk. If he comes at me, if he fights me… I'm not sure I'll survive. It'll depend on how far he wants to go, and honestly, I'm pushing him enough that he's going to want to kill me.

Maybe I deserve that. I shouldn't be here. My pack is dead. I should just give up, stop fighting, and accepting my reality.

I have no future.

All of the Aline pack will be dead. We'll just be another statistic, another pack to become extinct. We won't be the last, but it's our time. Our number's up.

Bellanore's dad won't be in danger. She can move on, find someone else…

The thought makes my stomach twist, and I let out a low growl.

Roald eyes me. He thinks I'm gearing up to fight him, but that's not the case. He's a non-issue.

The thing is, if I don't do it, Zaun the demon will just find someone else to go after Ronath instead. Maybe he'll even do it himself. I don't know what the demons are after, what they want in the long-term, but I wish I wasn't caught up in any of this.

If I hadn't killed that drow…

If I hadn't, I would be dead right now. Bellanore never would've met me. She never… She never would've fallen in love with me.

Because she confessed that before Zaun showed up.

And I didn't say it back.

I can't feel. I can't feel love or hope or excitement or anger or fear or fright. Nothing. Sometimes, I pretend I can. I'll even act like it, but I don't actually feel it.

That's what leaves a lone wolf first, your feelings. You'll slowly become a husk of yourself until there's nothing left, an empty carcass, and then you'll rot away to nothing at all, just a bit of dust.

I never should've tried to befriend Bellanore. I never should've dated her.

And I never should've made her fall in love with me.

I hadn't thought that possible. I mean, the more I got to know Bellanore, the more special I realized she is. Why the others won't see how amazing she is because of her demonic side and not in spite of I don't know. Their loss.

My gain.

Only I shouldn't have gained her, not her trust, not her love, not her company.

Nothing.

I deserve nothing.

No. I deserve death.

Actually… I felt something when I heard Bellanore's declaration. I definitely felt shocked.

And then, I felt something much worse.

Guilt.

I felt guilty for tricking her because she shouldn't have loved me. She can't love me. I don't deserve it.

Roald's nostrils flare, and he runs his hand through his black hair before crouching back down and settling into his fighting stance. "Feeling guilty about how you've treated and talked smack about Nia, huh?"

There's not enough room in here for a brawl, and Roald knows it. He lunges, and I move to the side, only he's not gunning for me. As he leaps into the air, he transforms into his wolf, and he shatters the window and falls onto his feet on the grass outside.

My room is one story up, and I don't even know at this point if I can transform into my wolf. Besides, I'm still armed from wanting to go after the demon.

Which is laughable. All I knew was his name. I didn't know where he lived. My plan would've been… I never formulated one because Bellanore showed up, but most likely, I would've had to start asking around about Ronath. Rhonda Rainbow, my fairy friend, she might know something. I've considered asking her before, but I didn't want to involve her. I still don't.

There's nothing to be involved in now.

It would be all too easy to ignore Roald, to not bother with this farce of a fight that he wants to bait me into, but when I turn to my door, Decker Winds and Elliot Snowblood are both there, blocking me in.

I scowl. "He wants me to fight him? Fine. I'll go down to him."

"There's the window," Elliot says, pointing to it as if I'm a moron.

"I'll go down the stairs," I counter.

Elliot opens his mouth to argue.

Decker elbows the blond werewolf in the stomach. "If he wants to go down the stairs, let him go. We can follow him and make sure he does."

Elliot rolls his brown eyes, but the two goons step aside to let me by.

It's a matter of trust to walk past them, to have my back to them, but I almost trust Decker. I haven't spoken to Elliot much one-on-one.

Decker's afraid of Nia. That much is clear, but I think Decker has a conscience. If push comes to shove, will his conscience win, or will fear? That's the issue because Nia thrives on fear.

They follow me outside. Roald is waiting, pacing in a tight circle, the grass beneath his paws already matted down. When he sees me, he draws back on his haunches and springs forward.

I'm not feeling the fight, not at all, but I'm not about to back down, and I'm already armed. Right before Roald can jump up to rip out my throat, I allow the daggers up my sleeves to fall into my hands. I slice at him, nipping his nose, causing him to bleed, jerking just enough out of the way to avoid his gnashing teeth.

But I forgot about his claws, and they slash against my chest. It's superficial, but I'm so wounded already from the effects of the curse that I stagger back.

Decker races forward, coming between us, declaring Roald the winner, and I don't care. As long as it's over.

Roald, the so-called leader of the rough crowd who adopted me and now seems to have kicked me out, turns back into his human self. Decker wraps his arm around Roald's neck, and Elliot comes up to their leader too. Decker's the only one to acknowledge me, with a simple nod.

Whatever.

By the moon, this hurts more than it should. Who wants to bet this will leave a scar too?

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Chapter 3

Robb

I'm not about to head back to the room. It's not safe there, but then again, is there anywhere on this Earth that is safe for me? I'm dying. My wolf is dying.

I'm cursed. It's only a matter of time.

But I do need what's in that trunk, so, despite the pain, I drag myself back to my room. Teleporting sure would be handy right about now, and that makes me think about Bellanore, which makes me think about that cave I found her near that time she smelled of smoke.

It's not easy, and I'm bleeding heavily by the time I drag the trunk down the stairs, and that's only the beginning. I pause to put a hand to my wound. Yeah, there's no doubt about it. I'm doing to scar. Great. Soon, I'll have enough scars that my entire body will be marred and imperfect.

Just like me.

With a grunt, I get the trunk out the door. There are several werewolves who live in the castle with me, but funnily enough, none of them are around. Who wants to bet that Roald saw to that to ensure no one would interfere? I really hate that werewolf.

But I hate myself more.

I drag the trunk all the way to the cave, and I slump down. It's awkward, but I use the trunk as a pillow, basically hunching over it, and I pass out.

When I wake, the amount of blood I've lost makes me woozy. The wound's not as superficial as I initially thought. I remove my shirt, rip it into strips, and bandage myself.

One thing about werewolves, they're like vultures or sharks. They hate weakness, and they can smell blood. They can sense weakness. I guess that might be why I allowed myself to get caught up in Roald and his rough crowd in the first place.

There's no doubt about it. Others will come around circling, smelling my blood. I won't have just Roald and Nia Forge to worry about.

At least the semester's almost over. I almost didn't think I would live this long, but I've managed so far. Maybe I'm tougher than I thought.

Or I could just be too stubborn to die.

But that stubbornness? I'm not sure how much longer that's going to last. It won't be enough forever.

The curse will win one day, and if I keep getting into physical altercations, that victorious day will come that much faster.

But because the semester is almost over, maybe I can talk to the professors. I don't want to sit in classes anymore. There has to be a way that I can get around being near the other students.

And yes, that does include Bellanore.

It's early, very early. The sun's just barely beginning to rise. The awkward position I slept in did my body no favors, and I risk heading back to the castle to grab a few pairs of clothes. I get dressed and head to the castle that holds the professors' offices. It's not hard to track down the three professors I have.

Professor Narcissa teaches predator instinct. I have that class last, and it's with Bellanore.

The professor eyes my approach. Her nostrils flare slightly, and I'm guessing she can smell the blood from my wound even through the bandages.

"Good morning, Professor," I say.

"You look like you should be in bed," she says.

"I'm good. So good that I was wondering if you could just give me my grade for predator instinct now and be done with it."

She lifts her eyebrows and eyes me, her expression more amused than annoyed. "And what makes you think that you should be allowed to leave the course early?"

"Because I'm the best student in the class."

"That's debatable."

"Who's better?" I lift my chin, doing my best to be full of bravado when I feel like my legs are about to collapse out from under me.

"Bellanore Shade for one."

"For one? I'll grant you her, but there's no one else."

"Maybe not," she muses. Her nostrils flare again. "If you would prefer to do assignments and projects, you can do that in lieu of attending classes."

"Wonderful. Thank you."

"This will be much harder than if you just come to class," she says dryly, "so you might not wish to thank me just yet."

"Thank you," I say again, and I dash off.

Next, I come across Professor Gremma of compass sense. She's sitting behind her desk in her office, and I stroll right on in like I own

the place without bothering to knock.

"Good morning, Professor Gremma. You look especially lovely today."

She looks up and rolls her eyes. "What do you want, Robb?"

"I—"

"And I must say you don't look especially lovely today."

I clasp a hand to my heart. Just one. I would've done two, but a wave of dizziness washed over me at that moment, and I had to grab the chair across from her desk to steady myself. "I'm wounded."

Her eyebrows arch.

I flinch at my word choice and start to ramble. "I was wondering if it might be possible for there to be another way for me to finish the course without my attending classes."

"Why the lack of desire to attend my class?" she asks dryly.

"I'm… I enjoy the class. I do. You're a wonderful teacher—"

"Your nose is looking browner by the second," she deadpans.

I grin. "I'm sufficient enough. My compass sense is impeccable."

"It's not bad, I'll grant you that," she says with a sniff. "Very well. I'll have you endure the same test that Bellanore Shade underwent—"

"Bellanore?"

"Yes. One night, I met Bellanore north of the Pendes Wood. I blindfolded her, exposed her to wolfsbane, and transported her to another location. From that location, she had to return to campus within one hour. Are you up for this task?"

"She doesn't take the course anymore, does she?"

"She was given an A for her marks. It took her only thirty-three minutes to accomplish the task."

Wolfsbane. I suppress a shudder. I'm keen to get out of the course, yes, but to subject myself to torture…

"I don't necessarily want to finish the course tonight," I hedge. "Can I do other tasks, a different set of tasks to finish the course? I don't want to be done right away and risk missing out on anything such a great teacher like yourself—"

"You can stop trying to flatter me. Fine. I will come up with a list of… activities… for you to do that demonstrate your knowledge of compass sense. If you do well enough, it's possible you can finish a few days early, maybe a week or two early. Now, is there anything else?"

"No. Thank you."

I duck my head and head out of there.

The third professor, the last one I approach, is none other than Professor Rockhound.

The thing about Professor Rockhound? He hates me. He has since my first class with him. If anyone's going to give me a hard time about

this, it'll be him.

It also doesn't help that my class with him is to start in fifteen minutes.

Thankfully, he's in his office, heading toward the open door as I knock on it.

"Robb." He scowls.

Great. He's not in a good mood.

"Look, I'll cut to the chase. You want me out of your hair. You hate me, and I understand. I'm not my favorite person either. How about we come up with a way that I don't have to be in your class anymore?"

"Fine."

"Fine?" I gape at him. I hadn't expected him to agree so readily.

He nods shortly. "I wouldn't say I hate you. Do I dislike you? Yes, without a doubt. You're cocky and arrogant, but what gets under my claw the most is why you're cocky and arrogant."

"And that is…"

"You know you're good. You knew just about everything with wallcrawling before you set foot in my classroom. There isn't anything more I can teach you, aside from endurance, which is what I strove to drive into you since you first came here."

I blink a few times. Is he actually giving me praise?

"You can continue with your studies to earn an A, or you can accept a B, and we'll be done."

I consider. "What would you want me to do to earn that A?"

Professor Rockhound gives me a wide grin. "I am so glad you asked…"

Ask me if I'm glad.

Nope.

Professor Rockhound has me film myself doing all kinds of crazy wallcrawling stunts all over the state. There are more places than one would think to climb in Virginia, and most of the time, he has me do the stunts as a human and not as a wolf.

It's all right. Leaving campus allows me to steal food. Yes, I know meals are given away on campus, but when I say I want to be away from the other students, I mean away.

Professor Narcissa is a beast too. What she has me do is to square off against her. I'm to use my predator instinct to survive, and honestly, I do my best. She's stronger and faster, and my curse isn't doing me any favors. I'm lucky I can coax my wolf out for the bouts, or else I would have a lot of explaining to do. If I were in peak form… The fight I had with the drow had been epic. I had lived through predator instinct and saw it all the way straight through to lunar mind. My wolf took over and slaughtered the drow, and it had been

ruthless. It had been carnage.

He killed my entire pack. He would've killed me.

The drow tried to.

He failed.

But I failed too. I failed my pack because I'm going to die. Professor Narcissa makes that very clear. She doesn't hold back when we fight like this, and I don't' want her to, but if I can't best her, there's no way I can best a demon.

As for Professor Gremma, I'm grateful I didn't opt for the wolfsbane. An early end to the class would've been nice, welcome even, but I'm still struggling to survive. I'm weak and growing weaker, and something has to change and soon.

It's a lonely end for the rest of my first year at Moonstone Academy, and I hate it. I hate every second of it. My life isn't my own. If I could, I would just be an ordinary student here. I would date Bellanore, and my future would hold promise and hope.

Instead, I'm wasting away. There's nothing I can do.

Until I start to think about another werewolf student, one who needs to be stopped because she's psycho and will initiate a war between werewolves and vampires if she can.

Nia Forge.

I might be cursed, and I might die, but maybe I can do something good with my last remaining weeks on the Earth.

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Chapter 4

Bellanore

A few days later, I'm feeling even more lost and unsure. I'm keeping to myself mostly. Ellamaria's been giving me space, but I know she's worried about me. As for Robb, I can't deal with him right now. I want to know what's going on, and I know he won't be able to get away with lying, so that's a huge plus, but I can't. I just can't with him.

My dad… Let's just say that I can't with him either.

But I also want to keep tabs on him. If a demon wants Dad dead, then it's possible that other demons do too. If I'm with him, I can make sure he's safe.

As if he can't take care of himself. He can, but it's possible he doesn't realize that others might come after him. If there's one thing a lot of demons are, it's arrogant.

So when my dad calls me on Friday night, I don't let it go to voicemail.

"Are you going to apologize?" he says as soon as I answer.

"Are you?" I counter.

He snorts. "You are my daughter," he murmurs. "Come to the forest."

"Why should I?"

"It's time for a lesson."

"A lesson in what?" I ask suspiciously. "Because if this is punishment…"

He actually laughs. "I want to teach you. You should be thrilled."

"Yeah, sorry, no. I'm not."

"You're coming," he growls.

"Possibly."

I hang up. Honestly, pushing him probably isn't in my best interest, and I sigh and teleport to the forest. It's not as if I have a date or anything important tonight. Might as well see what Dad wants to teach me. If we fight again, I'll just teleport away. It's as simple as that.

Dad's already there, of course, leaning against the trunk of the tallest tree in the clearing. He flashes a grin at me, and I grimace in return. He wants me here, so I don't know if I want that.

Oh, how things have changed. When exactly did I start to feel so antagonistic toward him?

Right around when he wanted me to walk through fire.

If I just explained to him about my fire, maybe then he would understand that you can't expect me to walk in fire as if it's nothing. I already have a burn mark on my arm to prove it.

But I have my pride. I don't want to seem weak in his eyes. His opinion matters.

He cares about me, right? Or maybe he just wants to train me to be a bodyguard, to be a protector. Maybe he does realize that others are after him, and he wants me to be loyal, to have allegiance to him.

If he only knew that my boyfriend is supposed to kill him.

Former boyfriend.

My stomach twists, and I look away.

"Are you ready?" he asks.

"Depends on what you want me to do?"

"Change into a deer."

I lift my eyebrows. So I really can shapeshift into whatever animal I want, not just a wolf?

"You might want to hurry up and do it," Dad remarks dryly.

Something rustles in the bushes, and I can see eyes. An animal. What kind? A predator? Dad wants me to turn into a deer? Does he know how many animals hunt deer? Wolves, coyotes, cougars, jaguars, and lynxes, to name a few. A few!

Whatever it is, the animal hangs back for now. Probably waiting for me to shift. It might even be a shifter or a werewolf or even another demon.

I swallow hard.

"What are you waiting for?" Dad snaps. "Time is wasting. I want to see what you can do, and your standing there doesn't inspire much confidence."

A deer. I close my eyes and picture one in my head. The transformation to a wolf is natural. It's innate. I can shift into a wolf in a few seconds. There's no pain associated with it, not when the fur bursts out of my skin or when my bones shift and twist to take on a canine form.

But this… this is different. For one thing, it takes longer. My feet have to turn into hooves, not paws, and my legs are longer. The tail is weird, and I don't know if my deer is all that perfect or pretty, but I spy Dad.

He's smirking.

And that animal? It bursts out of the shadows as if a hound from Hell.

It actually is a bloody hellhound.

The hound bursts into flames as he streaks toward me, and what do I do? Remember, I'm a deer.

Yes. I just stand there like a deer in headlights.

It's as if I have an inner deer that I'm reacting like the animal would, and the hellhound just bears down on me. I'm going to be hunted and eaten, and all my dad is doing is standing there, watching. He'll witness it, the death of his daughter, and he won't lift a finger to help me.

I could turn and leap away, but the forest, the trees… I don't know how to use these long legs, and I don't want to trip, break a leg, and have my life end that way.

Two thoughts come to mind. I can shift into a bird of some kind and fly to safety.

Or I can turn into my wolf.

Maybe it's a bit of a cheat to do this, but I'm my wolf in a second. The hellhound isn't deterred, and my dad huffs with annoyance.

Whatever, Dad. Watch this.

Instead of engaging the hellhound, I race away. The hellhound, predictably, gives chase. I know these woods like the back of my hand, and I'm banking on the hellhound being ignorant. Just over that ridge, just a little farther…

The hellhound nips at my heels. He's faster than I thought, but the second my paws touch the rock, I let myself drop down and tuck myself under the slight overhang of the boulder.

The hellhound's speed doesn't do it any favors. It can't stop, and it jumps into the air.

Splash!

The hellhound lands in the water.

Smirking, I crawl out from the spot and stare down at the hellhound. Its doggy paddle is pathetic, and I realize it's drowning.

I shift to myself and start forward, but a hand clamps down on my shoulder so tightly that I can't move. Dad forces me to stand by and watch. As a result of my actions, the hellhound dies.

My stomach twists again, the knots so tight that I think I'm going to be sick.

It's not easy, but I yank away from him.

"Very nicely done," Dad says.

"What was that?" I hiss.

He lifts his eyebrows, his features visible in the silvery light of the moon. The reflection on the pond is beautiful, majestic even, but I can't enjoy the sight.

“I take it you don’t want to do the next shapeshifting scenario I planned out,” he says dryly.

“No!” I burst out. “Not if… Not if…”

“Not if it’s to the death again?” he asks.

I shudder and take a step back away from him.

“Death is natural. You need to be willing to fight to the death. Life isn’t fair. It’s messy and complicated, and if you think you can get by on your looks alone… You might be able to, but why settle? Why not own your life and do whatever you want? Let no one stop you.”

Not even you.

I don’t say it, but I definitely think it.

“What would you have had me turn into next, Dad?” I ask. “A mouse? A fly? Do you have a cat nearby? A flyswatter?”

“You act like I want you to fail. That’s not true at all. I want you to be able to face any challenge that life throws your way.” He appraises me and then shakes his head with a heavy sigh. “I know about your being bullied at that academy.”

I stiffen. “I’m not—”

“Don’t lie to me,” he growls.

He snaps his fingers.

From all around us, other predators step forward, including a cat.

“You would’ve had me turn into a mouse,” I say, horrified.

“And a zebra, an antelope, maybe a buffalo…”

“You wanted me to survive against all of them?”

“Yes, with a grand finale of you going up against three starving lionesses where you would have only been able to shapeshift into whatever animal I called out.”

“And if I hadn’t listened?”

Dad just smiles.

I swallow hard. It had been terrifying enough with that hellhound. The now-dead hellhound. To do all of that… Talk about grueling tasks, each one more dangerous than the last.

Dad waves his hand, and the animals—shifters? Demons?—they all go away.

Except for one. The perfectly healthy cat.

“Drain its life,” Dad says.

“What? Why?”

“Because I said so.”

It’s something human dads say all the time, but coming from my dad, it’s especially heinous.

“You want to train me,” I say through gritted teeth, “pick something I actually want to do.”

Dad flicks his hand. The cat goes flying through the air and slams hard into the trunk of a tree. It collapses to the ground, and I can

already smell the blood.

I can't help it. I race over to the animal. Water pricks my eyes, and I can barely see my dad through the unshed tears. "It's dying."

"I told you to drain its life. Drain it. Ease its suffering."

I choke back a sob. No. No, I won't do this.

My hands touch the wounded cat, and I try to transfer some of its pain into me, but there's a wall blocking me. I can't.

Footsteps sound as Dad approaches. He clucks his tongue. "I said to drain its life. Do not disappoint me, Bellanore."

My eyes narrow. I've never hated my dad more than I do at this moment, and I wish so very much that I could both drain life and give it.

Can I? Can I do that?

Before I can try, Dad yanks the cat from my grasp, and he drains the life away in seconds to the point that only bones remain in his hands, bones that cascade to the ground in a macabre display of total disregard for the sanctity of life.

"I…" I can barely move my lips to get the words out. "I don't know who you are anymore."

"Oh, Bellanore, cut the crap. You've known who I am all along. You just pretended otherwise. Now, shall we continue?"

"No!" I jump to my feet.

Dad holds out his hand. A ball of fire appears. I gasp and take a step back, but he just smirks. "If you won't walk through flames, then you better get started on learning pyrokinesis."

Wait. My mind races. "You moved the cat with…"

"Psychokinesis, yes. You should learn that too. The ability to move objects through mental effort can prove very useful."

I hold out my hands, wanting to push Dad back. Maybe that's what he wants, to push me to the point of giving in to my anger, but I'm already there.

Dad, of course, doesn't move at all. The only thing that changes is the size of his fireball.

"Pyrokinesis," Dad says lazily as he tosses the fireball as if it's an ordinary ball. It now hovers above his other hand. "It's the ability to manipulate fire."

"You… you conjured it, didn't you?"

"Yes. The most proficient pyrokinetic users can conjure fire as well. Don't worry. I don't expect you to conjure it, but…"

And he whips the fireball at me. We're so close that I can feel the flames already, and I barely have time to react and move out of the way, but the fireball just alters its course to continue after me.

"Use your power," Dad shouts. "Put it out or divert it back to me. Burn me, Bellanore!"

The fireball is so close. The heat's so immense, and I can't. I won't do this. Whatever this is, it's terrifying, and I'm done playing.

I teleport to the entrance of the cave, the one I attempted to walk through fire in. Fear has me crouching, but the fireball didn't follow me.

Choking back a sob, I turn and plow right into someone.

Into Dad.

He gives me the most disapproving glare a dad can give before he vanishes.

Dad followed me just to show that he can trace me wherever I go.

I'm terrified. Absolutely terrified.

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Chapter 5

Bellanore

The moon shines down brightly on my hand on my windowsill, and I shiver even though it's not cold. If anything, it's almost too hot. Werewolves tend to run a few degrees warmer than humans, and I think I might even more so because of my demonic blood.

Demons are forged from fire, or so my dad likes to claim.

There are three weeks between the first year and the second year, and tomorrow morning is the first day of that break. I plan on staying on campus, but I have a feeling my dad will have other plans. I've managed to avoid him since that terrible night when my life completely turned upside down. Not only did I break up with my boyfriend who I love—no, loved—but I also severed ties with my dad. I blocked his number on my cell, and I know that won't stop him, but so far, he hasn't reached out to me. I have a feeling that'll change tomorrow.

Robb also hasn't reached out to me, and I haven't reached out to him. Each night, I lie awake in bed, wondering if I should go and see him. Right after everything went down, Robb stopped attending predator instinct class. After he didn't show up for an entire week, I asked Professor Narcissa what was going on. She explained that Robb asked for his lessons to be done in private.

He doesn't even want to see me.

And a thought came to mind. What if he's trying to ask the professor for details on how to use predator instinct against a demon? What if he wants to go after my dad?

What if he wants to go after that demon who seems to have a hold on him?

Surely, Robb's had to have thought about that, right? Why would Robb have to do that demon's bidding? Unless that demon has something on him, is blackmailing him… Again, I wonder if the demon has threatened the rest of Robb's pack.

Robb's been through so much, and he's going it alone. He hasn't gone after my dad, true, and that demon freaked me out. That demon

isn't going to let Robb have years and years to do this. If that demon gets too impatient, he might act alone, and he also might lash out at Robb.

So yes, I'm fearful of Robb, and I'm also fearful for him. It's all so very confusing.

And I might not have sought out Robb, but I know where he is. It almost feels like he's encroaching on my territory since he's taken up living in my cave, the one where moss used to cover the ground inside, the same moss I set on fire to try to walk on fire.

Another failure on my part.

Is that what my relationship with Robb is? Just another failure in a long line of them? Because if I'm anything, I'm a failure. Why else would my mom abandon me? But she had the right of it. Dad is terrifying. He's a monster, and he wants to convert me into his mini monster sidekick.

A knock at the door pulls me away from my depressing thoughts, and I quickly wipe a hand down my face. I'm shocked to realize one of my cheeks is wet. A tear slipped out without my realizing.

I clear my throat. "Come in."

Ellamaria pops in, crosses over to my bed, and sits on it. "You look like you could use some chocolate," she says.

She removes her left hand from behind her back and hands me a box.

"My mom doesn't believe me when I tell her I don't like chocolate, so here you go."

"Thank you." Chocolate can make things better, but not right now. Still, I'm not about to ignore the kind gesture, and I pop a piece into my mouth. The outside is a deep rich dark chocolate, and the inside is a gush of melted chocolate.

Correction. Chocolate can make things better right now.

"I can't believe we did so poorly at the Grand Hunt," Ellamaria says, flopping back on my bed.

"Make yourself at home," I remark idly.

She waves her hand. "Did you know that my mom won the entire thing her first year? She was so disappointed to learn that we basically did nothing."

"I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault," Ellamaria assures me.

She's wrong. I had been too distracted by everything with Robb and my dad, and I couldn't focus. If you can't focus during a hunt, you aren't going to be able to survive. It's a good thing it's not a life-or-death type deal because I could've gotten us both killed if that had been the case.

"We'll have this coming year and the year after," I tell her.

“Yeah,” Ellamaria says. “Still, it would’ve been nice to actually find something to hunt. They let loose how many animals for the Grand Hunt?”

“At least one hundred.”

“And we couldn’t even find a rabbit.”

“Well, maybe if you hunt a rabbit tonight, you can keep its foot for luck.”

“I am not going to hunt a rabbit just for its foot!”

“I didn’t say to do that. You can eat the meat.”

“I know, but I prefer turkey or chicken.”

I find myself grinning despite myself.

“Do you think we’ll be able to have a say in our courses next year?” she asks.

“I doubt it. I heard rumors that most year twos have to have a history course about werewolves.”

She rolls her eyes. “No way. Who doesn’t know the story about Lycaon and Zarab? Hey, do you know if you’re related to Zarab?”

“No.”

“No you don’t know, or no you aren’t related.”

“Dad’s not a necromancer,” I explain. “Zarab was. That’s one power that not every demon has. Trust me. I’m not related to him.”

“Yeah. Wow. Good. Although wasn’t Zarab supposed to be the most intelligent of all beings?”

“Yes.”

“Hmm. It would be a nice feather in your cap to say that you are from the line of the most intelligent of beings.”

“Of demons,” I huff.

“Demons are beings,” she says, her brows knitting with confusion.

“Yes, but it’s such a demonic thing to say. Most intelligent of all beings sounds much more important and impressive than just most intelligent of all demons.”

Ellamaria chuckles. “You think way too much, you know that, right?”

I pop another chocolate square into my mouth. This bite has nuts mixed in, and I smile. I’ve always loved that combination.

“That Lycaon sure wasn’t the smartest when he challenged Zarab. Why exactly did Lycaon serve his own son as the meat for the meal anyhow? I never understood that.”

“We really shouldn’t talk smack about the father of all werewolves,” I tease her.

“It’s a serious question!”

“And my best guess is that Lycaon was a bit crazy. You have to be insane to kill your son and cook him in a pie.”

“Was it really a meat pie?” Ellamaria asks, turning a little green.

“I’ll never eat another meat pie ever again.”

“Stop being so dramatic. You know you will. They’re your favorite food.”

Ellamaria shudders. “Not anymore.”

“And Zarab was just as vicious as Lycaon. He could’ve just made Lycaon turn into a werewolf under the full moon, but no. He had to be vindictive and change Lycaon and his descendants into terrible, ferocious, mindless wolves. Not that Lycaon had any descendants just yet since he killed his own sons.”

“How thoughtful Zarab was to restore life back to the son!” Ellamaria says. “See? Not all demons are evil.”

“Yes, and Zarab was so powerful that he restores not just the body but the mind and soul too.”

“Nowadays, necromancers can’t bring back the mind or the soul, right?”

“Correct. The body is just an empty vessel… if you discount that the body can house the necromancer’s soul or mind. Not all zombies are mindless. They’re controlled by the necromancer.”

Ellamaria shudders again and rubs her arms up and down. “Please tell me there aren’t a lot of necromancer demons.”

“I don’t think so.”

“I hope not!” She sits up and runs a hand through her dark brown hair. “At least the brewing war between vampires and werewolves have calmed down.”

“Yes, well, that’s been going on since the first werewolf and vampires.”

“Be fair to Lycaon! He was out of his mind at the time! He never would’ve killed Ambrogio otherwise.”

“Cousins,” I mumble. It makes me think of Romelia, my cousin. She has a vampire for a mother but a demon for a father.

“If Ambrogio hadn’t abandoned his cousin for Selene,” Ellamaria starts and then stops. She considers me. “I guess you can be the one to tell me if love really is worth leaving your entire life and family behind for.”

My mouth goes dry, and my tongue feels too big for my mouth. I want to deny the charge and claim that I’ve never been in love, but even now, even when I want nothing to do with Robb, I still want to go check on him, to see if he’s all right.

It doesn’t make any sense at all, but I still care for Robb even if he also makes me incredibly worried, and I feel so hurt yet. Did he care about me at all?

No. Of course not. He couldn’t have. Lone wolves can’t feel anything, certainly not love.

He never loved me. All that time together, all of the sweet

memories we have… Does he think about our kisses? Did he feel anything then?

"I'm sorry," Ellamaria mumbles. "I shouldn't have—"

"Lycaon felt betrayed by his own blood," I say in a rush to change the subject. Ellamaria and I haven't talked about Robb in depth, about what happened, but she knows he's a sore subject for me. "Lycaon never wanted to be king in the first place. Ambrogio just abandoned not only his people but his family too. Maybe that's why Lycaon tried to trick the demon in the first place. Who knows? If Ambrogio had been there, maybe Lycaon never would've gone insane. He never would've killed his son. He never would've been cursed, and there would be no werewolves."

"No vampires either, and Selene wouldn't have… Do you think she really did become the moon?"

"Of course not," I scoff, "but Lycaon heard that, and he knew that every transformation that he suffered was because of that moon. The pain each month probably also helped to drive him even more insane, and he started to hate Ambrogio even more."

"That's when he went to see his cousin."

"They fought verbally for weeks."

"Which suggests that Lycaon, even crazy, didn't actually go there to kill Ambrogio."

"But when the moon was full…"

"Lycaon attacked Ambrogio." I pause. "Do you think the vampires are right?"

"About what?"

"Vampires say that Ambrogio didn't fight back. Werewolves tend to think that Ambrogio wasn't strong enough of a hunter to fight back and win, that he didn't have a chance."

Ellamaria wrinkles her nose. "Ambrogio was a vampire then. He was a hunter. Who knows what would've happened if the two truly squared off against each other?"

"So you think Ambrogio just laid down for Lycaon."

"Even if Selene wasn't the moon, she wasn't in the picture anymore, right?" Ellamaria asks. "They say love makes you do crazy things. I would guess the absence of it might too."

"Lycaon might've been driven by anger and rage, but he wasn't completely a monster. When he came back to himself and saw the blood in his hands and realized what he had done, he was going to kill himself."

"Do you think his son witnessed the fight?" Ellamaria asks.

"I would think so. I mean, his son forgave him for killing Ambrogio, for killing himself. That's crazy powerful."

"I know you probably don't want to hear it, but I think forgiveness

can be used as a weapon," she says softly.

"What do you mean?"

"Look at what happened to Lycaon. He was insane. He was mad, so mad he was ready to kill himself over what his mind made him do."

"He suffered from the lunar mind," I remind her.

"Yeah, but he killed his son well before he became a werewolf, remember? But his son forgave him. What happened to him afterward?"

"Lycaon turned his life around. He became one of the best kings his people ever had."

"Yes. And werewolves were able to master their transformations, to stop craving flesh and eating blood. He helped them. Vampires… Ambrogio wasn't there to help them, and maybe they aren't like us. Maybe it's impossible for them to outgrow their thirst, but… I don't know. Forgiveness completely changed Lycaon."

"What are you hinting at?" I ask suspiciously. Is she referring to my dad? To Robb?

Or my mom?

Ellamaria won't look at me. "It's a shame that the vampires learned about what happened to their sire. If they hadn't…"

"It's not just on the vampires," I say, thinking of Romelia. She's not evil despite her dad. I won't have anyone speak badly about her. "Yes, they hated werewolves, but the werewolves didn't help matters. Lycaon managed to keep things civil for as long as he lived, but after his death… Some of his descendants were crazy. They had the same hatred that he used to have for his cousin, and that hatred, from vampires and werewolves both, is what Nia is trying to use for her own gain."

Ellamaria curls her upper lip. "I hope I don't have any classes with her."

"I wish she would transfer to another school," I mumble.

"Where? Magical Hunters Academy? Can you imagine her as a hunter?"

"Oh, please. She would want to be a paranormal executioner, and you know it."

"They would never allow her to."

"And they shouldn't. She'll abuse that, I'm sure."

There's a slight silence. I'm starting to feel more like myself now, but I'm also a bit unnerved. Thinking about hatred and forgiveness and love… They're all heavy topics, and right now, there have been several people who have wronged me.

But have I wronged them too? Dad wants to teach me. Sure, he probably has ulterior motives. Scratch that. He definitely has ulterior motives, but so what? I've always wanted to train, and he is pushing

me. I can shift into at least a deer. I'm sure I can master shifting into other animals too.

Is it just shapeshifting, though? Or is it transformation? Maybe I can turn into anyone. Or anything. If that's the case, I could do an impersonation of people.

How perfectly demonic of me to think that.

And then my mom. Is it my willingness to learn and train under my dad that pushed her away? Is it something I did? I've always wondered if it had been because of Dad, but I never stopped to consider that maybe it's my own fault.

And Robb… Robb…

I swallow hard and turn back to face the window and the moon.

Behind me, Ellamaria huffs a sigh. "Do you think year two will be better than year one?"

I shrug. "Who knows?"

"I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"I just think you need to hear that."

I turn back to her. Without another word, she stands, gives me a big hug, and then leaves.

I'd like to hear those words coming from Robb, but I also think maybe I should say them to him. I told him that we weren't done. I want the full truth from him. There's still a lot I don't know about this whole mess.

I should've gone to see him long before now.

Which is why, as soon as I wake up in the morning, I head straight for the cave. I have no reason to think that Robb will leave the campus during the break. He'll be there, right?

And he is.

I peek inside. I'm not sure what to expect. I haven't seen Robb in weeks. As far as I know, he hasn't joined a pack. He's the definition of a lone wolf, and he had been so weak before, when I last saw him.

I didn't expect him to have wasted away, but to see him now…

He looks better. Worlds better. Not only does he look stronger, but he's far more muscular than he had been when I last saw him. He's gained muscle weight, and he looks hotter than ever.

To say I'm baffled and confused is an understatement. Has everything he told me been a lie? That shouldn't be possible, but how is he thriving without a pack?

Did he make a deal with a demon? He knows better than that, right?

But he is serving one. Maybe the demon gave Robb the strength to be able to carry out his assigned task.

Because looking at Robb now… if he has the element of surprise on his side, he just might be able to get the jump on my dad.

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Chapter 6

Robb

I can sense Bellanore approaching long before she enters the cave. I feign ignorance, continuing to go through my yoga poses. They help me to be able to focus, to draw out my inner wolf. I'm trying to help him the best I can. There's no healing him. I'm beyond that now, and it's possible I might make things worse for myself in the long run, but for now, I'm doing what I can to survive for a while longer with a much better quality way of life.

Thinking about Nia that one time is what made all the difference. I even bested Professor Narcissa once. It was more of a draw a second time, but I'm getting faster and stronger and feeling more and more like my old self all the time.

It's not without its drawbacks, though, and it's just as well that I've had a self-imposed exile. As grateful as I am to my three professors from my first year, I'm not sure if the ones I'll have for my second year will be nearly as accommodating. They might also ask me questions and try to uncover why I'm seeking isolation when werewolves are known to do the exact opposite out of necessity.

I go into crow, lifting my body off the ground so that only my hands touch the ground, my legs tucked inside my arms, my knees drawing in to hold my arms steady. Slowly, I lift one leg and then the other, so I'm doing a headstand.

"What in the world is going on?" Bellanore explodes.

I grin and then wonder if I should frown so that she can see it upside down as a smile.

"I thought…"

"You thought what?" I ask. I push off the ground and flip forward to land on my feet. "You thought I was dying?"

"Well, yes! You told me that your pack all died because of that drow. I… I believed you! You looked like you were heading…"

"Heading down to meet a reaper?" I quirk my lips. "One might come by at any time for me."

"You're trying to say that you're still dying?" she asks, crossing her

arms.

Her hair's longer in the time we've been apart. She looks just as lovely as before, even with her brow crinkling some from her distrust and wariness. I hate that distrust, but I did warn her before.

"You told me once that I should be careful," she says slowly.

I glance away. She's hitting hard. When I said that to her, I didn't go into specifics. She had no idea what I truly meant by the statement.

"I should be careful of what? You? Was that a warning to me that you hate demons?"

"You know I don't hate demons," I protest.

She lifts her eyebrows.

"Fine. Yes, of course I hate Zaun."

Her eyebrows lift even higher.

"The demon from the other night," I mumble.

She nods slowly.

"But I don't hate any others."

"Because you don't know them," she says softly.

"I'm not going to judge someone I don't know."

Bellanore lifts her chin. "I don't know if I can judge you."

I wince, hating what she's insinuating—that she doesn't know me or at least she doesn't know me anymore.

"Judge me all you want. I'm doing what I need to do to buy myself more time."

She narrows her eyes. "Why can't you just join another pack?"

"That would be so simple, wouldn't it? Man, I never would've thought about that on my own!" I bite my tongue to stop the bitterness from coming out of me.

Because I am bitter.

I'm feeling emotions all right.

None of the good ones.

I do a couple of deep breathing techniques to try to keep my temper in check. When I open my eyes, I half-expect her to be gone, but she's watching me, her expression empty. I can't tell what she's thinking.

"It wasn't a warning about demons," I mumble. "It was a warning, though."

"For me? About what?"

"I wanted… I didn't want you to fall for me. I didn't want you to have to experience death, loss. I… I was selfish and weak, and I understand that you don't love me anymore," I say in a rush. "I…"

The silence is awkward, and she stares at the ground instead of my face. How can I blame her? But it hurts so very much that she won't deny my charge, that she won't correct me by saying, *No, Robb, this doesn't change my feelings for you. I'm just confused.*

She might be confused, but it's plain to me that she doesn't love me. If she did, she would've shown up long before now.

Actions speak louder than words. Mom used to always say that.

"How are you surviving?" she asks.

"Hunting. Gathering. I might've stolen some food, too, walking around restaurants, farms…"

"You can't eat with the rest of the students?" she asks.

I cringe, hating that she can't even bring herself to say, "us." Is that too hard to ask, "You can't eat with the rest of us?"

"I can, but I prefer not to."

"Why?"

"Because Roald and I have spilled blood, and I don't want that to happen again."

"You two spilled blood?"

I smirk. "So he didn't blab to everyone that he cut me."

"Where?"

Normally, I do yoga without a shirt on, and yes, I scar. Today, for whatever reason, I have a shirt on but not for long. I remove it so she can see the scar for herself. It's not that impressive. The one by my eye is much darker, but something flickers in her eyes too quickly for me to register and recognize before her gaze is blank again.

"When?" she asks quietly.

"That night. After you left."

She rubs her forehead. When we started to talk, she stood in the entrance of the cave, but somehow, she's much closer to me now. Not close enough to reach out and touch me but close enough.

No. Close but not close enough.

"That's not what you wanted to hear when you asked how I'm surviving." I inhale deeply. "I've been taking Mystic Twilight," I admit.

"You're what?" she shrieks.

"I told you. I'm trying to figure out a way around everything, but __"

"But that's not smart!" she cries out. "Do you know what will happen if you abuse it, which you clearly are?"

"Yes," I snap. "I'm not stupid. I thought I made that clear already."

"Your heart might explode!"

"And my wolf is already dying!" I roar. "If I hadn't started to take it, I would be dead already. How would you have liked that? To come here to the cave to see my rotting corpse? Or would I have just been a pile of ashes? Tell me, Bellanore, would you have felt guilty then?"

"I…"

"I don't want to kill your dad. I don't want to kill anyone. But I'm stuck. I can't out-trick a demon, and I even asked Zaun if there's

something else I can do to appease him. No dice."

I need help. Bottom line, I need more help than just the Mystic Twilight.

Nia's mom used to make Mystic Twilight for her pack. Normally, a werewolf only ingests Mystic Twilight once a year. It increases our power and makes our wolves stronger. But the potential for abuse is there. Why drink it annually then? The vast majority of werewolves don't abuse Mystic Twilight. Plus, I think it helps us as far as not eating flesh, drinking blood, and descending into madness like so many of the first few generations of werewolves.

Of course, I didn't ask Nia or her mom for the Mystic Twilight. Thinking about them just sparked the idea, and I did some digging on supes.com. I managed to find the recipe. Funny how that information is available but nothing about demons.

But yes, I need help, but I'm not going to ask Bellanore or anyone else for it.

I'm on my own.

I'm the very definition of a lone wolf.

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Chapter 7

Bellanore

My mind is racing. I don't know what to think, what to believe.

Robb doesn't look like he's dying, but Mystic Twilight is incredibly powerful.

I've already suggested to Robb that he join another pack. Maybe I shouldn't have said that because it's too logical. Of course he would've thought that. I insulted his intelligence.

But grief and guilt can make a person not think clearly.

I know about the guilt part. I killed that hellhound. I hadn't intended to kill him, but I still did, and I've had more than a few nightmares where I'm chased by his hellhound brothers. They're all on fire, and they burn me alive.

I always wake up sweating from those dreams, and I swear my burn mark is on fire all over again. It's terrible.

"How do you deal with it?" I blurt out.

"Deal with what?" Robb asks. He sounds tired, and despite his form being strong and solid, beneath his eyes are twin dark circles. Maybe he's not sleeping well. It's possible guilt is preventing him from sleeping well.

Guilt from what, though?

And it could just be a side effect of the Mystic Twilight. I don't think enough research has been done on it, honestly. Yes, it's been used since Lycaon's time, but that doesn't mean that it's something we should continue to take.

But if we don't, it's possible we might start craving flesh again.

Or so we're told. What if that has been a lie? What if Mystic Twilight is used to control werewolves to some extent?

"You can ask me anything," Robb says, "but I'm not sure what you're referring to."

"Deal with all of it," I mumble.

I want to ask about his killing the drow, but why should he feel guilty over that? The drow killed his family and his entire pack.

"You can ask specifics," he offers almost eagerly.

I lift my gaze from the burned moss to his face. Some of the moss has regrown from my walk through fire attempt. All of him looks eager. He's dying for attention. He needs companionship, but he's kept himself here, isolated away from everyone.

Robb is a lone wolf, but he can only survive that way for so long, even with the aid of Mystic Twilight.

And just like that, I realize I believe him. What he's told me is true, but I still feel like I'm missing bits and pieces.

Yes, I can detect if someone is lying, but I know a few fairies. They can skirt around the truth and almost but not quite tell a lie. It's possible for someone to tell the truth without giving away anything important and also to conceal things and lie through omission. I'm not sure that Robb is lying by omission. He might just be waiting for me to ask the right question. Talking about all of this can't be easy for him.

He's been through so much, and he's suffering.

And I've been adding to his suffering.

I swallow hard. "You killed the drow," I start slowly, not wanting to mention the hellhound.

"Are you wondering if I regret it?" Robb scowls, and his scars seem darker somehow, both the scar on his eyelid and the ones on his chest. "I never thought a time would come when I would, but killing him… becoming a puppet of Zaun… Maybe the world would've been better off if Dural had killed me."

"But Dural would've gone after my dad," I protest.

Robb's lips twist into a crooked grimace. "And if a werewolf could handle the drow, surely a demon can."

I hang my head. Somehow, I feel like this is my fault, which is ridiculous but also not. I've made things worse for him.

"Why are you here?" I ask, gesturing to the cave.

"I told you. I don't—"

"I mean attending Moonstone Academy," I interrupt. "I can't believe you want to attend for another year."

"Given my condition?" He smirks, but a wave of sadness washes over him.

I start. The emotion rolling off him in waves is real. It's palpable. He can feel emotion.

Maybe because of the Mystic Twilight.

Does that mean he can feel other feelings? Can he feel for me?

So what if he can? If Dad finds out…

Dad won't find out. If Robb intended to go after my dad, he would've already. Because of the Mystic Twilight, Robb has strength again. Not that I think Robb would survive, but he would have a shot, maybe.

But he's not. He really doesn't want to do that demon's bidding.

He needs help, but he's not asking for it.

Stubborn werewolf.

Robb sighs and runs a hand down his face. "I figure I'll be safer here, especially since the campus will probably be under lockdown soon."

I lift my eyebrows. "Why do you think that?" I ask curiously. "Nia doesn't have access to… You aren't getting Mystic Twilight from her, are you?" I can't help the sharpness of my tone.

"Of course not," he snaps, and I wince. I deserve his anger for questioning him. "I've been making my own."

I can hardly hear the mumble.

He really is a lone wolf to go to that length to survive without a pack.

"Do you…" I clear my throat. "Do you know why the demon wants my dad dead?"

"I don't know his reasoning. I'm not exactly going to ask a demon for details," he says dryly.

I'll give him that. I don't think most people would want to do that. You risk angering the demon, and angry demons tend to kill people.

"I want to know everything," I blurt out. "I want to understand what you're going through."

"I'm cursed," he explains.

"I know. Without a pack—"

"The drow, Dural, before he died, he cursed me. I should've gone for his throat, but with his dying breath, he used his silver tongue. I can't just go out and join another pack."

"Drows are dark beings," I murmur.

"So very dark," Robb mutters menacingly. "Makes me wonder if they're a form of demons."

I wince. "Elven demons, yes," I say.

"Vampires are demons too, then, aren't they? They'll never be able to survive without blood."

"I… I don't know," I murmur.

"About them being demons or the blood part?"

"They're certainly demonic," I admit. "A full subclass of demons? I don't know. There are so many that can be considered lesser demons. I mean, you could argue that imps are. They're certainly mischievous enough, and some of them are downright evil and cruel."

And some are underlings of demons, like the one my dad used me as a lie detector machine on.

"I'm glad you're here," Robb says, "and please, don't think of yourself as a lesser demon."

I take back a step. I was just thinking that.

But I shake my head and try to ignore the goosebumps covering my arms. “You, ah…”

“I missed you,” Robb mumbles, looking away. The admission makes him shy, quiet, and I can’t help finding it endearing.

But I don’t respond. What can I say?

“I still miss you,” he continues, his gaze on the ground. “You’re here, but you aren’t. You’re not with me, and I understand. I… I thought about telling you, but I figured I couldn’t. I mean, how would it have sounded if I told you that I was cursed? That I have no choice but to either kill a demon or die a slow death? That I don’t want to do either of those? Would you have believed me?”

“I can tell when someone’s lying, remember?” I take that step forward, but there’s still some space between us. Not a lot but enough.

There’s a gulf between us, even if we’re only about three paces away from each other. I don’t know if I can take the leap to join his side.

He can’t join another pack. Even helping that demon won’t change that.

Not unless…

“Robb, you can’t join another pack, right?” I ask slowly, hoping I got this right. I can’t help feeling a bubble of excitement at my idea.

“Correct.”

“But what if you don’t join another pack?”

“I’ll die. That’s the whole point of the curse. Lone wolves—”

“You don’t have to be alone!” I clap my hands together and hold them clasped against my chest. “You just need to rejoin your pack!”

He stares at me blankly.

“If we find a necromancer—a good one, one with the same power as Zarab—you remember Zarab, right? I know there are some who think the story of Lycaon is just a myth, a folktale, but it’s not. It’s true. Zarab had been a demon. He’s dead as far as I know, but you already know that demons can die, or else that one wouldn’t have sentenced you to kill my dad.”

“Unless he sent me on an impossible quest just so that I can die.”

“Why did the drow kill your pack? I know you said it was to gain favor with that demon, but why did he want your pack killed?”

“I told you before. I don’t like to ask demons questions. I’m in enough hot water as it is.”

“But that’s just it!” I’m almost giddy. “We just have to find a necromancer with the same power as Zarab. He can bring back your family! Your entire pack! Together, you can then take out the demon who asked you to take out Dad, and all will be right in the world!”

Robb doesn’t blink. He doesn’t say anything, but he does the strangest thing. He tilts back his head, and he laughs and laughs. It’s a

little unsettling, and I'm worried.

I'm worried that Dad did something truly heinous, something so dark and evil that even demons want him dead to stop him.

I'm worried it might be something Dad has planned, that the evil is yet to come.

I'm worried that Robb is going to die and that there's nothing I can do to save him.

And I'm worried that I'm going to fall for Robb all over again.

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Chapter 8

Robb

"Go ahead," I say. "Try to find another necromancer demon."

"Another?" Bellanore asks faintly.

I nod. "I know demons tend to lie a lot. Kind of their thing to be tricksters, but I believe Zaun. He's a necromancer demon. Not only that, but he's the son of Zarab. If any demon is going to have the power to resurrect my entire pack with their body, minds, and souls all intact, it's going to be him. No one else can do it."

"No." She shakes her head. "There has to be someone else."

"Bellanore?"

She blinks a few times, and when she finally meets my gaze, her eyes are covered with unshed tears.

I gape at her, drawn into the lovely vision of sadness. As much as I hate that I'm causing her pain, she's a sight to behold, and I wish we could stand here talking for the rest of my short life.

But the conversation has to continue onward. "I already checked. I asked around until Zaun grew testy. He's the only necromancer demon capable of this feat."

"If he's so old and powerful, why doesn't he make a move directly against my dad? And if he wanted your pack killed in the first place, why bring them back? Why offer too? This doesn't make any sense."

"Zarab was the most intelligent of demons," I say, "but he's dead. Demons don't die unless they're killed, right?"

She nods.

"Who do you think killed him?"

"His son," she murmurs.

I grimace. "Zaun is as cunning as his father and just as powerful. My pack together might not be able to bring him down."

"Maybe he feels threatened by my dad. Maybe he wants a pack devoted to him. No other species alive has more loyalty than werewolves. He could be playing a long, long game." She bites her lower lips. "The stars…"

"What about the stars?"

“I just remember something Nia told me once. She said she saw something in the stars. I don’t think werewolves can read the stars, but fairies can. Angels can.” She exhales through her nose. “Some demons can, although it’s not easy, and most can’t nowadays. I can’t, that’s for sure. My dad can’t. At least I don’t think he can. But maybe Zaun can. He might already know how all of this plays out.”

I can’t help myself. I reach forward and grab her hand. “Bellanore, you can’t go after Zaun.”

She jerks her hand free and scowls. “Of course not! I’m not stupid. Right now, we need him. He might be the only way you can survive.”

Might.

It’s such a fickle word, a promise without being a promise.

A whisper of hope.

No guarantee of success.

A glimmer of failure.

If Zaun can’t bring back my family, if he can’t bring back even just one member of my pack, then I will die. There are no other demons who can save me.

A zombie of a werewolf wouldn’t be enough to save me. No, I need my old pack alive as they had been, or else I will die.

Not all magic can be undone, and some of the most powerful magic comes from a person right as they die. Murder itself is such a violent act that it can cause a person to not be able to cross over to Heaven or Hell but to wander the Earth as a ghost until they can complete their unfinished business. Not all ghosts are able to eventually cross over, and from what I understand, not all of the ghosts that are created via murder need to have revenge as their unfinished business. Not everyone who is murder turns into a ghost. I hadn’t thought about that at the time, but as far as I know, Dural isn’t a ghost. Surely he would’ve come after me.

Or else he would be even more under the thumb of Zaun.

Great. But if Zaun wanted Dural alive, he could’ve just resurrected him, right? Dural’s just a soul now, presumably in Hell, yes, but if Zaun has plans for him, I’m not privy to them, and I don’t need to know. I’m too involved as it is.

“I don’t want to have to rely on a demon,” I grumble. “No offense,” I quickly eye.

“None taken,” she murmurs. “I, ah, I assume you’re going to not come to class this year either?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think I can. Not with Roald.”

“Don’t tell me you’re afraid of him?”

“I’m not afraid of him. If he comes at me again… I don’t want to fight him.” A muscle twitches in my neck.

“What is it?”

“I just think it’ll be better if I complete projects and assignments __”

“Professor Gremma didn’t make you do what I did, did she? She couldn’t have!”

“I didn’t risk it, so no. She offered, but instead, she gave me other assignments. Wolfsbane…” I shudder.

“Good. That’s good. Well, ah…”

“It’s because of Professor Narcissa,” I blurt out.

“Predator instinct?” she asks, lifting her eyebrows.

“We would fight for me to show off my instincts. They’re… They’re a little more on edge since I’ve taken the Mystic Twilight.”

Bellanore’s lips purse. “Of course they are,” she says.

I ignore the hint of displeasure and disgust in her tone. “I’m worried I might not be able to hold back against Roald if he provokes another fight.”

“Because walking away isn’t a thing,” she says dryly.

“You know full well that if Roald wants a fight, he’ll get one.”

“If you leave,” she starts to argue.

“He won’t let me, and you know it.”

Her nostrils flare. “If he really wants to fight you that badly, he’ll find you here.”

“I know that.”

Her eyes narrow, and she appraises me critically. “Do you want that?”

“No.”

“You sure about that?”

“Am I lying?” I ask coolly.

She scowls, and for a long moment, we’re quiet. There are so many things I want to say to her, things I should’ve said long before now. My feelings are a mess, and that’s all because of the Mystic Twilight. I don’t know what’s me, and what’s that potion, but I’m not myself, and I hate it.

I hate the curse.

I hate Dural and Zaun and even Ronath.

But most of all, I hate myself.

Because I’ve been selfish. Killing Dural… it haunts me. I do feel guilt over it. My nights are plagued by terrible dreams, where I’m feasting on his flesh, drinking the drow’s blood. I can’t even recall if I actually did that or not. Reality… what is real? What is my messed-up mind conjuring up? I’m so confused, and I’m worried I’m losing my mind.

After all, after losing your emotions, a lone wolf loses their mind before dying.

I’m that much closer to dying.

Even though I have an avenue to solve all of this. There's a solution just waiting for me to be able to lift the curse and, more importantly, bring back my family and my entire pack.

But only if I kill again.

When I already feel guilt for killing the one responsible for slaughtering my pack.

I'm so messed up and wracked by guilt. I don't know if I can go through with it and kill Ronath. Even if Zaun named a different demon, a terrible, evil one that even I think the world would be better off if he were dead, I'm still not sure I could do it.

I might be a fighter, but I don't want to be a murderer.

I didn't murder Dural. I didn't. Why did I even think he might come back as a ghost?

I really am starting to go crazy. We fought. It had been self-defense. If I hadn't killed him, the drow would've killed me.

This guilt is irrational, but it feels real just the same.

There has to be something I can do, something worthwhile, something that can make a difference during the short time I have left.

"I hope you have a good second year," Bellanore says softly, breaking the silence and thankfully drawing me away from my painful reflections.

"You too, Bellanore."

She nods and turns to go.

"Bellanore, I'm sorry."

"For what?" she asks without turning around.

"For not being good enough."

She doesn't ask what I'm referencing, but maybe it's understood.

My heart aches as she leaves, and I'm filled with sheer and utter agony. It hurts so much, enough that I want to claw through my skin, yank open my ribs, and rip out my heart.

But I don't. I suffer in silence, and I go about trying to find a measure of peace before the school year starts anew.

~

The classes for year two aren't that bad. There are four courses this year instead of three, and the first one bores me to tears.

History.

Professor Louis, though, seems nice enough when I seek him out and ask if I can do a few papers instead of attending class.

"Why don't you wish to join in discussions with your peers?" he asks.

"Because my peers prefer to discuss with me with their claws." I unbutton my shirt to show him the scars as proof.

He nods slowly. “And your pack?”

I do my best not to flinch. “Aline.”

“That’s an unusual one,” he murmurs. “I haven’t taught an Aline here in well over a decade.”

“Yes, well, we moved away from the area for a while. Some of the others went to Moonshine Academy.”

“Ah, in Montana, yes. You’re all back now?”

“Yes.”

In a manner of speaking.

“The course of history isn’t just about history. It’s about a philosophical discussion. Papers alone won’t—”

“We can discuss,” I blurt out.

He lifts his eyebrows, and I realize he’s an older wolf. His eyes give it away, revealing the years he’s seen. Otherwise, his hair is dark with no gray, his eyes bright but also sad from knowledge and years lived. He’s kept his body fit. Maybe he’s sixty? He could be younger or older. Werewolves tend to live until one hundred and twenty or so, a little longer than humans. The oldest werewolf I know of lived to be one hundred and fifty-two.

“I suppose a discussion among two people is better than none,” he muses.

“Thank you. I appreciate it.”

Next up is vision. Werewolves tend to have decent day and night vision automatically, but according to Professor Darrow, we can enhance our vision so that we can see even minute details that other species miss. He’s a tall beanpole of a werewolf. I didn’t think it was possible for werewolves to be as thin as he is. He’s younger, too, maybe in his twenties, but when he gazes at me with his black eyes, I want to squirm. It feels like he can see through me, straight to my cursed soul.

“How can I help you?” he asks.

“I want you to teach me your tips on the side, outside of class.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Because I think you can help me go further than the other students.”

It’s a boast and a lie at that. I have no reason to think this.

Professor Darrow eyes me suspiciously as he stands from his chair behind his desk. “Why would I want to teach you separately when I can just give you extra work during class?”

I smirk and stare at him and then my chest and back at him. If his eyesight is as good as he claims his vision is, he should be able to see through the threads of my shirt to my scar.

“What of it?” he asks with a wave of his hand.

I appraise him, trying to see if there’s anything I can see on his

person that will give me a leg up on him. And then I see it. It's subtle, but it's there. His fingernails flicker back and forth to the tips of his claws. It's so very slight, just a split second, and I can barely see it, but once I see it a fifth time, I'm certain it's not my eyes playing tricks on me.

"You don't believe in Mystic Twilight, do you?" I ask.

He stiffens.

"Are you in the Pride pack?" I assume.

The Pride pack is the only pack that I know of that doesn't have its members drink Mystic Twilight on their birthdays, having too much *pride* to rely on a potion for their strength.

"I am Darrow Blackridge, thank you very much," he says with a sniff. "Why did you think that I am in Pride?"

"Your claws."

"I don't—" He curls his fingers.

"You don't have complete control over your fingers." I eye him. "I hope you have complete control of your wolf."

"I do!" He slams his fist against his table.

"Blackridge doesn't believe in Mystic Twilight either," I say as if it's a fact. It might be, but I'm not sure on that point.

He flares his nostrils. "Very well," he says, and I don't forget that he hasn't said anything to agree or disagree with my "fact."

"You'll train me?"

"I will, but be prepared for headaches," he warns. "When you can see, you can learn when to use it. Sometimes, what you see and what you don't can be the difference between life and death."

Oh, how I do not like the sound of that.

I head quickly toward the next office when Professor Gremma heads down the hall. She spies me and crosses over.

"You didn't want to finish compass sense with your peers. Is that how you feel with weather immunity as well?" she asks.

"Yes, actually, if you don't mind."

"I don't mind. You have a keen mind, Robb, and I enjoyed pushing you harder than some of your peers."

I grimace. "That's not fair," I protest.

"Pah." Professor Gremma waves her hand. "You earned your A, and if you want an A in this course…" She grins. "See me Friday night outside. Meet me in the clearing in Pendes Wood."

"I'll be there."

She nods and marches on down the hallway.

Three professors down, one to go.

The last class, which is listed as my third class with weather immunity being last for the day, is one that I am most interested in. Professor Hyde teaches zoolingualism, the ability to talk to animals.

Some werewolves are only ever able to communicate with wolves, but I would love to have as many animal friends as possible.

Pathetic, yes, but maybe then at least I won't be so alone in the cave. Not even spiders or insects inhabit the space since I moved in.

Professor Hyde's office is amazing. Various birds fly around the ceiling. One rests on his shoulder, and on his desk sits a brown bear cub.

"Come in," he greets me warmly when I hesitate in the doorway. He waves me in, and the bird on his shoulder flies off, flustered. "It's all right, Sterling," he says.

The bird chirps and settles back down.

"How can I help you…"

"Is… Are all of these your pets?" I ask, shocked most especially by the bear cub.

Professor Hyde laughs. "Pets? No. The birds are friends. The bear cub…"

The bear cub's ears perk.

"Otso here is an orphan," Professor Hyde says. "A shifter attacked the parents, killed them, and ran off when I came up to them. Otso here was so young when it happened that he has now come to think of me as his—"

"Father," I supply.

Professor Hyde laughs and runs a hand through his longish brown hair before rubbing his small beard, that's mostly just thick stubble along his jawline. "Well, more his mother."

"Ah…"

"Your name?" he asks. "I'm Professor Hyde, but I assume you know that already because you sought me out unless you saw the cub and was curious?"

"I'm Robb Aline. I'm in your zoolingualism class this year. I was hoping to see if… Do you think I could help you take care of Otso?"

"You wish to learn how to talk to bears?"

"And birds and wolves and anything."

"Anything?"

"Even the spider in that cobweb." I point to the corner of his desk.

"Even the spider." Professor Hyde grins. "You don't want to be in class, I assume."

I shake my head.

"I've heard that you prefer to be alone. I also heard that you're a smart werewolf and a hard worker. Very well. After all, Otso will need to be watched while I'm teaching class, and the other professors… well, they might be able to speak to animals, but that doesn't mean they all share my love and fondness for them. Now, come. Otso, this is Robb. Robb, this is Otso."

I stroll forward, and Sterling divebombs at me, squawking and trying to claw me. Professor Hyde has to yell in order for the bird to listen and stop. Sterling snaps at him and flies out the open window.

Professor Hyde watches him disappear and then gazes at me with his blue eyes.

I suppress a shudder. Sometimes, animals can sense magic.

Can sense curses.

What did Sterling tell the professor?

But he doesn't say anything and resumes introducing me to the bear cub. Thankfully, Otso doesn't seem to mind my curse, and he even purrs slightly, almost like a cat, when I pet him.

Yes, this could be fun.

Maybe this year won't be terrible after all.

If I survive, that is.

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Chapter 9

Robb

The school year, so far at least, has been going well. The discussions with Professor Louis are interesting, and we debate more than we go over events of werewolves long dead. Professor Darrow is right about the headaches, but I can start to see grains in wood like never before. I can even start to tell what has happened to the trees over the course of its life just by looking at its bark. You can guess a tree's age by its height, but to truly know, you have to chop it down. A werewolf with full sight can tell a tree's age without killing it.

As for Professor Hyde, it's slow going, understanding the growls and grunts of Otso, but it's a joy to spend time with him. He's not a pet, but a real-life animal.

At least Otso likes me. The birds don't. They always flee when I come. Some birds have been witch's familiars over the centuries, although witches nowadays don't bother with familiars. It's possible birds can sense magic more than other animals. Or maybe Otso is merely too young to know. Regardless, Sterling and the others wish to avoid me.

And weather immunity is terrifying. Professor Gremma has teamed up with a witch to conjure weather for me to experience and withstand. It's more than just merely surviving the weather. If a werewolf can truly obtain complete weather immunity, rain won't touch him. Hail won't. Snow won't. He can regulate the temperature of the air surrounding him so that he never feels the cold and is never too hot. If I can master this, I'll never sweat again, even when I'm fighting for my life.

Which might or might not happen.

So far, I'm doing well enough, all things considering, but it's getting closer and closer to the Red Moon Ball, and I can't help but feel more than a little worried, especially considering what happened last year.

The rough crowd—Roald Jagger, Decker Winds, Elliot Snowblood, and Nia Forge—and I all went over to Blood Haven Academy, the

nearby academy for vampires. Needless to say, there was a fight, but before there could be any lives lost, I used haze avitores to make the werewolves and vampires forget about the attack.

For whatever reason, the herb didn't work on Nia. To make things even worse, I'm certain she doesn't believe my lie. I stopped her from killing a vampire by claiming that I saved a werewolf in the process.

She and I don't get along at all.

Roald, though, doesn't have her in check. He wants to be an alpha to those werewolves, but he's not ready to be a leader.

Nia is, though, and what a terrifying alpha she would turn out to be if she ever grew strong enough to have werewolves pledge their allegiance to her. The others don't seem to recognize how much of a threat she is, but I do. I know she is.

And I'm certain she'll have something planned.

It's a risk, but it's one I'm willing to take as I emerge from my cave. Normally, I'm able to see the professors when the students are all busy and occupied or else late at night. The harsh light of the noon-day sun beats down on me, blinding me. Under Professor Darrow, my eyesight has grown stronger, and I can see more details, but it's not a good sign that I can be blinded by bright light straight out of dim lighting. I'll have to mention that to him the next time we have a session. For the most part, he merely sends me exercises to do. We'll meet once a week for him to assess my progress.

The students are all eating in the courtyard, and I hang back, watching, waiting, looking for Nia. I see Roald, Decker, and Elliot. It's a bit of a shock to see Wyatt with him. Wyatt, Jett, Gayle, and Mindy —all of the Spark pack—used to bully Bellanore because of her dad being a demon. Honestly, if you ask me, it's beyond insane and idiotic to bully a demon's daughter.

Actually, for that matter, I don't know if they're still bullying Bellanore. As much as I've wanted to reach out to her, I haven't. I've been letting her decide if we should continue to talk or what we should do. I don't know where I stand with her, but I'm not going to continue to pretend that I can live forever. My life has to have meaning, and if I know Nia, and I do, she'll have something up her sleeve, and it's going to include her claws and vampires and spilling their blood.

Or something else equally wrong.

"Well, well, well, so it seems the prodigal werewolf has returned," a dry, female voice says behind me.

"Nia." I don't have time to turn to see her because she's already walking around to face me.

"What are you doing here, Robb? You should go back into hiding before you get hurt." Her brown hair is cut super short, a spiky pixie

cut. It gives her even more of an edgier look. Her ears had been covered most of the time last year, so I don't recall seeing piercings before, but her ears are covered in earrings and small dangling chains. Her blue eyes narrow. "Like what you see? It can be the last thing you ever see."

"What are you planning?"

"Who, me?" She places a hand on her chest as if she's innocent.

"Cut the—"

"If you want to be cut, that can be arranged," she hisses, but then she smiles warmly as if we're dear friends. "But I wouldn't want to cut you. So many people have already made you bleed."

"But I keep coming back for more."

"Yes," she says idly. "It makes me wonder if you were hit in the head. Not the brightest star in the night sky, are you?"

"You're going after the vampires again, aren't you?"

"Why? You want in?"

She asks that almost eagerly. Interesting. Are others not joining in with her? What does she have planned?

Not that I think she'll trust me at all.

I snort. "As if you trust me. You'll lie and tell me one thing and then set me up so that vampires can bring me down. You hate me."

"I do," she freely admits. "I abhor liars, and you lied to me. You sided with the vampires against us, and I won't ever forget that. If I'm given a chance to take you out, you better believe it, I will."

"You can go ahead and try," I tell her. "You should know that I've killed before."

"Have you now? Then you should know that I have too." She smirks and cocks an eyebrow. "Or have I? You'll never know." She leans forward. "Because if you find out one way or the other, I'd have to kill you, and then you would be dead."

"If it's one way or the other, just come at me now."

Nia just gives me her chilling smile and walks away.

Not to join the others. No. She's heading toward the castles that house the students.

Hmm.

I head back to the cave and wait until it's about halfway through the first afternoon class to head back out into the sunlight. The scent of Nia is fresh in my nose, and it takes some time, but I soon locate the castle where she lives.

It's not hard to wedge a claw into a window to force it up, and I climb inside. Nia's room is on the third floor, and that lock is much harder to pick, but I manage. My heart is racing. Because I'm anxious or because of the Mystical Twilight? I don't know, but this isn't good. Not at all.

And what I find inside is far worse by far.

There's a lab in here, not for cooking Mystic Twilight. I uncovered a few other potions that werewolves have used throughout the centuries. I'm using the term potions, but that's not accurate. Potions can only be crafted via magic by witches, but it's as good as any term to use.

Along with the recipes, I saw a few pictures, and only one looked like this.

Shade Toxin.

It's a poison that should work on vampires. It'll even affect werewolves too.

Wanting to test a theory, I alter one finger into a claw and touch the poison.

My claw glows a bright green, but I don't feel any effects of poison. I wish I was strong enough to risk cutting myself, but I'm not going to do that. It's bad enough that I wipe off the poison with a towel from the bathroom and sear a hole through it.

That potion is lethal. It's even deadlier than the one that I read about.

Quickly, I grab my phone and do some research. Thankfully, Nia's in class, but what if she cuts out early? I don't have a lot of time.

There has to be an antidote or something…

Here.

Funnel seed might help. It can be used for purification purposes as well as protection. Unicorn's blood would definitely help, but I don't have any of that on hand. I do have vulture's blood, though. I carry a lot of herbs on me at all times, but you don't want to know what else you can use vulture's blood for. Trust me.

Out of everything else I have on me, cosmic dust might help. It shouldn't cause anyone any harm, so I dump that in.

There. I've doctored the poison so hopefully, it won't kill anyone. I'm not sure there's anything else I can do. If I just went ahead and got rid of this, she'll just make more, maybe even a double batch. If I go to the headmaster, Virgil Thorn, Nia will still find a way to continue her vendetta against the vampires.

No. If she's going to turn hunting vampires into a game that favors her, I'm going to have to be all right with evening the odds a bit and hoping for the best.

I can't get directly involved. If I do, Nia's liable to go after me. She's clearly resourceful, and it's bad enough I have a demon breathing down my back. I don't need a psychotic werewolf after me too.

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Chapter 10

Robb

Quickly, I leave Nia's castle after making sure to remove any trace of my being there. I even brought along and left some super-smelling flowers to try to make sure that there's no trace of my scent.

Before I can make it back to the cave, Decker and Elliot cut me off.

"If you know what's good for you," Elliot says, crossing his arms and trying to look tough, "you'll be here the night of the Red Moon Ball."

"For what?" I ask Decker.

The brown-haired werewolf just flares his nostrils.

Elliot smirks. The wind ruffles through his blond hair. "We're going to attack the vampires on their turf."

Been there. Done that. You did too.

"And if I don't?" I mutter.

"You better," Elliot says with a snarl. He bumps against my shoulder as he storms off.

Decker hesitates.

Elliot calls, "Coming?"

"Yeah, yeah," Decker mumbles. He eyes me. "You might want to."

"Why?"

Decker just shakes his head and drops his gaze to the ground.

"Do you know what she's planning?" I ask, knowing I don't have to specify which she.

"She wants vampires dead." Decker meets my gaze. "She wants you dead. If you want someone to watch your back…"

"I appreciate it," I say, trying not to sound dry. I witnessed him fight the vampires last year. He's not the best of fighters.

Or maybe his heart hadn't been in on it.

Sometimes, you make the wrong choices, end up stuck with the wrong people, and find yourself with no way to break the cycle and earn your freedom. Decker's not as stupid and blind as the others. He doesn't crave power like Roald and Nia do. All Decker wants is to belong.

He has a pack, though. Why can't he ignore these fools? Why did he have to get in so deep with them?

But Roald or one of them said something about the lot of them not feeling appreciated in their pack, or their packs were small. Something. They wanted out.

Maybe you shouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth.

Decker nods and rushes away to catch up to Elliot.

So Nia wants me there. What do you want to bet she only does because of our conversation?

Well, I guess I'll witness firsthand if my little stunt to doctor her poison will actually work. If it doesn't…

It's a gamble all right, and all I can do is hope that Bellanore isn't involved in this mess.

It's going to be hard enough for me to ensure I survive the night of the Red Moon Ball. If I have to watch her…

But she's strong. She's even more of a fighter than I am. If things get too out of hand, she can even teleport away.

But there are no do-overs for me. I only have this one life, and it's hanging on by a thread as it is. One snip, and I'll land myself in Hell.

That's where all those who make deals with demons go.

And even if I made mine under duress, that's where I'll go to survive misery and torture at the hands of the demon I failed for all eternity.

That's why Dural hasn't come back as a ghost. I bet that's his life now.

It won't be mine.

I hope.

~

I hate being dragged into the attack of the werewolves against the vampires on the night of the Red Moon Ball, but here I am, in the forest near the edge of Moonstone Academy. Nia had us all line up, and she painted our claws. Somehow, the poison isn't the same. Our claws are all different colors. Some of the werewolves even ask for their teeth to be painted, and that really gets to me. They are willing to poison themselves in order to attack, maim, and even kill vampires they never met before.

What is wrong with this picture? So many things. Nothing is right. It makes me sick to even have to go through with this, but the looks Nia keeps sending my way assure me that coming here was the only choice I could make. If not, she would've hunted me down in the cave, and I would've been the first one to feel the poison's effects. I'm sure of it.

I'll go all right, but I'm not going to attack or kill vampires. No, I have a different plan altogether.

A weak plan that probably won't work much, but I'm going to try to prevent as much carnage as possible on either the werewolf or the vampire side. The last thing I want is death to visit the campus. Dead bodies might lure the necromancer demon Zaun here. So far, he hasn't paid me a repeat visit, outside of that one time when I called out for him to appear so I could ask him if there's something else I can do to appease him. He laughed in my face and teleported away.

That's why I'm hoping for a lockdown. It might not keep the demon out, but it might. That's what I have to cling onto, that small sliver of hope.

At Nia's command, we start to march through the Silver Ironwoods to reach Blood Haven Academy. Roald's up ahead, but when he pauses to talk to someone, he glances over and spies me. He waves the werewolf ahead and crosses over to me.

"Seems we're on the same side," he says stiffly.

"Seems so." I lift my claws. Most of us are humans yet, except for our claws. The ones who opted for poison-coated teeth are all in their werewolf forms already.

"Don't disappoint me," he growls.

"Don't you mean her?" I ask.

Roald bares his teeth. In the glow of the red moon, his teeth seem to glow as if covered in blood. Without another word, he stalks off.

Honestly, from afar, Blood Haven Academy doesn't seem all that different from Moonstone. There are castles everywhere, mostly because both academies had been made centuries and centuries ago, back before Christopher Columbus crossed the ocean blue, not that he had been the first to come to the Americas from Europe. A fair number of Native American tribes have magic in them, between being shamans or skinwalkers, and they had their own academies that they retreated to once the Europeans crossed over.

I don't think the skinwalker academies have castles, though, which makes me think that Blood Haven and Moonstone Academies were constructed in the Middle Ages some time or perhaps the Renaissance. The architecture is so similar that I almost wonder if the same designs had been used for each. Hmm. That suggests the designer hadn't been a vampire or a werewolf.

The sight of statues of vampires in their blood glory makes my stomach churn. Some vampires will have their stomach filled with blood tonight, filled with werewolf blood. The werewolves will have none to blame but themselves, but I'm not going to be the one to tell them to stop this course.

It's far too late for that.

A sudden wind gushes, and the werewolf beside me drops down to all fours. A vampire stands in front of him and then looks at me.

“Leave now,” I tell him.

His blood-red eyes widen. He takes one look at our numbers and vanishes, not teleporting but racing away.

But the fool returns with vampires, hordes of them, and the fighting begins. Trying to stop the carnage on either side quickly becomes a losing battle, but I fight until the bitter end.

I’m a fighter, even when I’m fighting in the name of peace.

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Chapter 11

Bellanore

I can't sleep.

I'm not sure why.

Actually, that's a lie. I've been lying to myself a lot lately. As much as I want to go and see Robb, to see how he's hanging in there, I don't. I can't.

Maybe it's the coward's way out, but I'm not willing to put myself in the middle.

That's not entirely true. I've been trying to track down that imp I helped save from my dad's wrath—Draz. Yes, that means I'm not listening, and yes, that means getting involved, but I need to know one way or another if my dad is as dark and dangerous as this demon Zaun seems to think he is. While demons do fight one another—after all, they *are* demons, and fighting kind of is their thing—they don't typically kill one another. They can, of course, but it's not easy to kill a demon, even for demons.

It's clear enough that Zaun wants an entire werewolf pack on his side, but why? What does he want their loyalty for?

It's these questions and hundreds more that prevent me from being able to sleep most nights. Maybe I should just talk to Robb, see if we can figure things out together instead of apart, but I can't get his words out of my head.

"…come here to the cave to see my rotting corpse? Or would I have just been a pile of ashes? Tell me, Bellanore, would you have felt guilty then?"

I don't know if I feel guilty, and I sure don't know how I would feel if he were to succumb to his curse.

There's no denying it, though. Robb could've asked me for tips about demons, their strengths, their weaknesses, their abilities, and he didn't. He didn't even learn that the demon he sought is my dad. Granted, there isn't a lot of public information available on my dad, so maybe he did try to research Ronath, but he didn't dig deep enough.

Because he truly doesn't want to kill my dad.

He doesn't want to do it.

As much as I want to ask around to find out about necromancer demons, and Zaun in particular, I'm unwilling to. Necromancer demons are some of the most dangerous and evil of demons. You do *not* want to be on their radar.

Besides, if I ask around about demons, Dad's sure to find out, and I don't want anything to do with him.

Oh, how times have changed. I used to enjoy our training sessions, but teleporting is one thing. Shapeshifting or transforming myself so that I can be prey to predators? How dangerous and twisted is that? And to kill…

Some demons draw strength from blood, from pain, and, yes, even from death. What if Dad does? What if he's been using the darkest of magic? What exactly was the item or items he wanted Draz to procure for him? And the imp asked for more time. Did Dad get his hands on it, whatever it is? Why did the imp need so much time to get it? Is he just stalling? Why not just bury himself underground?

Maybe he has.

Or maybe he's been put six foot under by my dad?

I hate thinking like this, and I throw my covers off. Maybe a walk out under the moon will help.

Quickly, I change into black pants and a white shirt that seems to glow with a strange red tint. Confused, I glance from my mirror to the window and realize the moon is blood.

It's the night of the Red Moon Ball at Blood Haven Academy.

No wonder my thoughts have taken such a dark and twisted path tonight.

Feeling even more anxious now, I leave the castle and start my walk. I don't make it far before my phone starts to ring.

"Ellamaria?"

"Bellanore, where are you?"

I stop walking. My best friend can't sound more hysterical.

"What's going on?" I ask.

"You aren't in your room. Where are you? Don't tell me you're heading over there."

"Heading where?" I ask as dread curls icy tendrils around my heart.

No. There can't be. Robb told me about last year, about how Roald and the others had gone to the vampires' academy and gotten into a fight.

Did they do that again? Is there another fight going on right now?

I'm not sure what happens. One moment, I'm on the phone with Ellamaria. The next, I'm running through Silver Ironwoods. I must've teleported here, but I don't recall actually doing that, and I'm lucky I

didn't teleport into someone else because the forest is crawling with werewolves.

Literally crawling.

All around me are wounded werewolves, and I stand there, shocked, gazing at the wreckage.

The fight didn't happen here, though. They're fleeing it.

The fight is still going on at Blood Haven.

I can stay and help them.

Or I can try to stop the fighting and prevent more from being hurt or worse.

It's a no-brainer.

I can't risk teleporting again. I haven't been to Blood Haven enough to know its layout. Instead, I use my nose and the stench of not only blood but of fear to guide me. Fear has such a bitter scent to it. It irritates my nose, but it's the sting of tears in my eyes that plague me the most. My heart is heavy, even as my footsteps are light. I could reach the battle that much quicker as my wolf, but I might be in shock. I'm not sure. I just know I have to get there.

And suddenly, I'm there.

All around me, werewolves and vampires are fighting each other. The reddish light of the blood moon shines down on us all, giving us all reddish skin, especially the porcelain-skinned vampires. Even fangs that haven't come in contact with blood appear red, and the claws… So many of them are slick with red, but underneath the blood, I see bits of various colors.

Confused, appalled, I stand there, rooted as if I'm a tree, a silent specter to this night of horror.

And then I see a werewolf in human form, standing back, half concealed in shadows, a smug little curl twisting her lips.

I march toward her. My path isn't direct because of the fighting, and I have to skirt around more than one deathmatch to reach her.

Nia doesn't look over as I come to stand beside her. "Bellanore. I see you didn't come with your fighting claws ready."

"You—"

"You didn't strike me as one to wish to partake. Am I wrong?"

"You—"

"I'm not, am I? No, you're here because you think you can do what exactly? Stop this?" She faces me with her trademark chilling smile. "Look around, Bellanore. You can't stop this. This is what we are. You, me, the werewolves, all of us are fighters, hunters. Vampires are hunters, too, and there's no reason for us to both be alive. Only one can come out on top."

"We don't need—"

"We do need this," she hisses. "You think you can stop me? You

think calling the headmaster and tattling to him and to my alpha will get? You don't know the first thing about me, and you don't know what I'm capable of."

There's a surprising hint of clarity to her words. She's not lying at all. Her aura is cool, muted even despite her impassioned speech. It's almost as if she's aloof. Does she feel anything?

"Why do you hate vampires so much?" I ask.

"Why don't you?" She chuckles. "Oh, Bellanore, how disappointed your father must be in you. You have a heart of gold. Demons don't respect that, you know. I think…" She taps a long, thin finger to her cheek. "I might be wrong, but I don't think so." Nia laughs. "Yes, I'm sure of it. Your father would be much happier if I were his daughter instead of you."

My palm itches, and I so badly want to slap her, to grab her hair, to punch her, to yank down her shoulders and knee her square in the face.

But I don't. I can control my emotions. There are plenty of demons who can't, the demons who allow their emotions to control them, the basest of emotions at that—anger, greed, jealousy, revenge.

There is a strength to emotions that not all demons recognize. I'm referring to the emotions demons tend to overlook—joy, happiness, love, even patience.

I can be patient. Nia is acting with purpose. She's not engaging in this brawl because she wants to oversee it, to observe it. This is just a small part of her plan, but what is her end goal?

Until I know that, I can't stop her.

She won't tell me what she plans, though. She doesn't trust me, and I might be good at impersonating people's voices, but I'm not that good of an imposter to be able to pretend to be something I'm not. I can lie, but she'll see right through me.

"Maybe my dad would be happier if you were his daughter," I concede even though it does wound me to say those words. "But the thing is, you should never underestimate a demon, and that includes me."

"Bah. I'm more of a demonic werewolf than you are."

I appraise her critically, paying special attention to her eyes. Most demons have red eyes, glowing eyes. Werewolves' eyes almost always turn amber once we're werewolves. Some have amber-colored eyes all the time, but my eyes glow green. Hers are blue without a hint of a glow. She doesn't have demonic blood in her.

But she certainly acts demonic.

"This needs to stop," I say.

"You can't stop what nature intended. There's only ever one apex animal at the top."

“Yes, you’re right.” I give her my own chilling smile. “What you can’t forget, though, is that the true apex animal isn’t werewolves.”

“It’s not vampires!” she shouts before flaring her nostrils and calming back down again.

My smile only grows. “You’re right. It’s not vampires. It’s not witches or fairies or anything like that. It’s demons, and you better not cross me because then there will be Hell to pay.”

It takes a great deal of courage to turn my back on Nia, but I’m not about to show any sign of weakness or intimidation.

The closest vampire and werewolf are fighting such that their arms are wrapped around each other, the wolf standing on his hind legs. I grab the vampire’s shoulder to shove him back and use my other hand to stiff-arm the werewolf.

“Go,” I instruct the vampire.

“Why should I?” he growls through his blood-stained fangs.

I give him a grin that shows off my own werewolf fangs.

The vampire grimaces and dashes off almost too quickly for me to see.

I turn to the werewolf. He swats my arm away, but I grab his fur.

“Go,” I instruct him.

He lets out a howl.

“Do you want to die tonight?” I ask, but he shoves me off and races toward the thickest part of the brawl.

Great.

Behind me, I swear I can hear Nia laugh, but I ignore her, pressing forward until I spy a werewolf in human form lurking by the trees, observing, not participating.

Gayle. Gayle Spark, one of a handful of werewolves who bullied me last year because of my dad and his dark nature.

Seeing Gayle here with that terrified look on her face makes me want to drop everything. I might not be able to stop this battle, but I might be able to help at least one werewolf.

Quickly, I make my way over to her, and it makes me cringe that I step into a puddle of blood. Vampire blood? Werewolf? Both, most likely.

Gayle almost jumps out of her skin when I touch her shoulder. There are tears in her eyes. She doesn’t seem hurt, but she’s also reluctant to leave.

If I can save one, that’s better than none.

I hold out my hand. Gayle hesitates, clearly wondering what I’m up to, but then she takes my hand, and I hurry us away. Yes, I could teleport back, but Gayle looks like she’s been through too much already.

What horrors will come to light once the blood moon sets and the

sun dawns?

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Chapter 12

Robb

Well, that's that. The campus is on lockdown again, and I am so very pleased about that at least. The rest of it? Not so much.

It's early in the morning, well before classes should begin, and I stretch near the entrance of the cave. The early morning light barely reaches me, but I smile. The temperature is beginning to drop, but I've gotten better at controlling the temperature of the air in my general vicinity. If it weren't for the curse, I might actually be excelling here.

Footsteps sound, and I want to grin at Bellanore, but I'm sure she's here because of last night. It turned into a slaughter. The poison… I hope my efforts helped, and if they had, then Nia truly wanted to kill as many vampires as possible. She's insane. That's all there is to it.

"Last night," Bellanore starts, halting a good distance away. She doesn't even want to stand close to me. That hurts more than it should.

"Did you dream of me?" I joke.

She scowls. "Not on your life," she sniffs.

"Good. I wouldn't want you to dream about my funeral and be all depressed. A girl like you shouldn't cry."

"I won't cry over you, Robb Aline."

"Sure you won't." I cross my arms. "What about last night?"

"Was it your idea?"

I gape at her. "Are you serious? You have to know—"

She stamps over to me and grabs my wrist. "Did you have poisoned claws? Did you have poison put on your teeth?"

I don't move. The last thing I want is for her to realize how hurt I am that she would think that lowly of me.

"I tried to stop the fighting. I failed, by the way, but I saw the vampires. I saw their wounds. They weren't healing. Gayle told me that they all had been given poison to kill the vampires. Is that what's going to happen? Slow-acting poison?"

My jaw aches. I'm clenching my teeth that hard.

"Did you have anything to do with the poison at all?" she asks

point-blank.

I hesitate. I didn't make the poison, but I did know about it, and I did fiddle with it.

Huffing a sigh, I shrug and free my wrist from her grasp only to hold her hand. She scowls, but before she can react, I admit, "I found the poison in Nia's room. I doctored it, so as far as I know, it shouldn't have been lethal. I didn't know how much time I would've had in her room, and if I made it too weak, she would've realized."

"You could've destroyed it!" Bellanore cries out.

"If I had done that, if I had altered it to the point that vampires would've been entirely immune… Nia might not have realized what I had done, but there's also no telling what she would've done instead."

"You…"

"I sneaked into her room."

Bellanore blinks a few times. "You thought she would be up to something."

"Yes. She's one to watch."

Bellanore closes her eyes slightly, and she squeezes my hand before she releases it. When she opens her eyes, there's a flash of pain in them.

"What's wrong?" I ask. "You saw the vampires. You went. Did you get hurt?"

"I'm fine," she assures me.

"Yes."

"Yes what?" she asks suspiciously.

"Yes, I had poisoned claws. I wanted to try to diffuse the fight as much as I could, but it wasn't easy."

"You were there? I didn't see you."

"I didn't see you either," I point out.

"Hmm." She hangs her head. "Robb…"

I stiffen. "I hoped you wouldn't get involved at all."

"You should've known better than that."

"I guess so." I eye her. "Your middle name, what's the initial?"

"M."

"For Mischievous?"

"Actually, it's Medea." Her glowing eyes sparkle. "Do you know what that means?"

"No."

"Cunning."

"That suits you."

"Thank you." She beams, and it takes my breath away.

The Mystic Twilight is starting to affect me more and more. I can feel more, yes. All of my emotions, especially the negative ones, are heightened, and I can feel myself being drawn away from hope to

despair, from love to hatred, from excitement to turmoil. It's almost worse than being entirely numb to every emotion.

For a moment, though, I'm struck dumb by the sight of her smile, and then my chest aches. My heart is beating far too quickly, and I know it's from abusing the Mystic Twilight.

If she realizes that…

I cough into my hand, and a heavy wave of despair hits me. As much as I want to ignore it, I can't, and I blurt out, "Why did you think I would have a hand in that battle?"

"I… I don't know."

I narrow my eyes at her. "I might not be a walking lie detector, but I can tell that you're lying. Spit it out."

Her eyes flash, and I hate myself for provoking her. I should've just let it go, but I can't help it. Feeling heightened emotions after feeling none means I feel everything a thousandfold.

"Look, I thought Nia had a hand in it, of course, but I couldn't help wondering…"

"What?" I snap.

Then it dawns on me.

"You're wondering if Zaun wanted the attack," I spit out. "Hate to burst your bubble, Bellanore, but that's not what he wants."

"Maybe it is," Bellanore spits right back out at me. "It is possible to want more than one thing."

"I know all about that," I snap.

"Do you?" she asks coolly.

"Yes. I don't want to be cursed. I do want to be free. I want my pack back. I want my family back."

And I want you.

I can't bring myself to say that last out loud, and it doesn't matter. She's already softening to me. It's a bit disheartening to realize that when I become aggressive, she does too. She feeds off my energy, and right now, my energy is sparked by everything negative.

"I told you already," I say gruffly. "I asked Zaun if I could do something else. He just laughed at me. He's, ah, I'm lucky he has a lot more patience than most demons because he could just go ahead and move against your father himself and leave me to die."

"He must not want to move against my dad openly," she muses.

"Apparently, but why does he think I can take your dad out? I mean, he knows I'm cursed. I… Before I started to take the Mystic Twilight…"

She purses her lips but says nothing.

"I didn't have much time left at all."

Again, she softens, but then she grimaces. "This Zaun has to have a plan. He wants your pack. He thinks you can do it."

“I don’t see how.”

Her mouth opens, and she snaps it shut tight. Her eyes close, and she winces.

“What is it?” I ask, suddenly afraid.

“Did he… Did he send you here? Did he tell you to come here?”

“Yes. The only thing he told me was that Ronath had a child who attended here. He didn’t say daughter. For all I knew, Ronath had a son. I did not befriend you or date you because of who your dad is. You know that, Bellanore. I had no idea he was your dad until you told me.”

She nods slowly, her features visibly relax. “I knew. I… I shouldn’t have had to ask. I’m sorry.”

“You don’t need to apologize. Nothing about this is exactly normal, but that’s my life.”

“Why aren’t you trying to find another necromancer demon?” she blurts out.

“There isn’t one,” I tell her patiently.

“But—”

“I’m going to do what I can with whatever life I have left. That’s all I can do.”

“Robb…”

“Don’t worry about me,” I tell her. “I don’t plan on going to sleep and not waking up anytime soon.”

Bellanore scowls. Yeah, we both know that my plans aren’t going to prevent the curse from happening. Just because I’ve found a way to delay the inevitable doesn’t change the fact that my death *is* inevitable.

“I guess I’ll see you when I see you,” I say.

Bellanore opens her mouth, shuts it, nods, and teleports away.

I miss her already.

~

A week later, I feel like I’m stuck in a rut. I don’t know what to do, how to handle the Nia situation. In the near distance, I spy a werewolf heading my way, only it’s not Bellanore approaching. It’s Mercy Lance, a werewolf I spoke to last year about Nia and a few other things like the vampire statue that had been beheaded.

“I almost thought you stopped attending here until one of the professors said that you’re earning the highest marks in the class,” she says once she’s in front of me.

“Which class?” I ask with a smirk.

“Let’s not worry about that so much and a certain werewolf instead. A certain werewolf power couple.”

“Nia and…”

“Andre.”

I furrow my brow. “Who?”

“Andre Pennington. You don’t know him?”

“No.”

She blows out a breath, her blond hair fluttering in the breeze she created. “I thought he was the one to come up with the idea for beheading the statue. I mean, he was the one to do it, but he got the idea from Nia.”

“They’re working together,” I assume.

She nods slowly. “Yeah. Andre… His brother is a first-year named Chandler. Was.”

“Chandler’s dead?”

“No, Andre is. Andre died in the fight, and honestly, I wish that would be the end of it. He got what he deserved after he armed the werewolves with poison.”

I gasp, feeling like she sucker-punched me in the gut. “There was more poison than what Nia made?”

I hadn’t even considered that Nia might be working with someone else, but different poisons would explain the different colors.

“Devil’s Tongue. Bonedust. Onyx Taint…” Mercy supplies. “Nia had poison too, huh?”

I nod slowly, numbly. “Why are you telling me this?”

“You don’t want a war between vampires and werewolves. At least you didn’t want that last year. I assume that’s still the case, and I don’t know what the future holds, but if Nia will get her way… She and Andre started dating over break this year, but I’m wondering if they dated secretly last year. You know, his dad is a demon.”

My jaw drops. “I thought Bellanore is the only student attending to have a demon father.”

“Her, Andre, Chandler… there might be one who has a demon mom and a werewolf dad, but that’s really unusual.”

I scowl. Hadn’t Bellanore told me she was the only one?

I wearily wipe a hand down my face. For the first time in months, I feel ready to fall over.

“A vampire killed Andre,” I assume. “If Nia thinks she loved him, she’ll react badly.”

Mercy snorts. “I agree. She doesn’t know what love is, and even if she somehow found some love in her hate despite the bottomless well of hate that she has for vampires, love can turn people into fools.”

“Yeah,” I mumble. “I guess.”

“I only just found out about Nia and her involvement with the statue,” Mercy says. “I have other… issues to deal with.”

“So you thought I can handle Nia.”

“I don’t know,” she mumbles. “I thought about going to the headmaster, but he’s ignorant. He’s not going to do anything to stop her. Clearly not. The whole lockdown? It’s a joke. Werewolves can leave if they want to.”

And demons can get through. I’m so stupid for thinking it might help to keep Zaun out. All the demon has to do is teleport here.

I scowl, frustrated and furious at myself. I should’ve done something to stop Nia.

Her alpha? I think Bellanore might’ve gone to Nia’s alpha already, but a lot of good that did. Who knows? Maybe her alpha is even fueling her fire and hatred toward the vampires. I’m sure Andre’s demon dad did the same to him.

“And who knows?” Mercy continues, beginning to pace. “What if the vampires are able to get past our guards? What then? What if they bring the fight to us? So far, we’ve gone to them every time. That might not always be the case.”

“I don’t know what you want from me,” I murmur.

“I don’t know what I want from you either, but I think… I don’t know.” She grimaces.

“Do you know why Nia hates vampires so much?”

“No. She’s tight-lipped about that, but then again, does she need a specific reason?”

“Guess not,” I grunt. “Her parents?”

“I don’t know anything about her dad, but I do know that her mom’s been demoted. The Forge alpha is single. So is she, and there was some talk that they might get together, but that’s not likely.”

“Because of Nia stealing the Mystic Twilight?”

Mercy nods. “At least, that’s what I’ve heard.”

“Her dad is a werewolf?”

“Is a werewolf, was one… I don’t know, but if you’re wondering if she’s secretly a demonic werewolf or a fairy one or anything like that, no. She’s a pure werewolf.” She eyes me with a perplexed grin. “Any more questions while I’m at it?”

“No, I think that’s everything.”

“Good.” She backs up a step and then hesitates. “Why don’t you attend class with the rest of us?”

“Didn’t you know? I’m special.”

“Arrogant is more like it,” she mutters.

“Not denying it, but when you can back it up, is it really arrogance? Or is it just a fact?”

Mercy smirks. “With you, it’s arrogance, but it suits you, given the whole scar look and all that. Just be careful not to earn any more scars, okay, Robb?”

“Don’t worry. It’s not on the to-do list,” I assure her.

She grins, winks, and leaves.
Too bad dying is on my to-do list, whether I want it to be or not.

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Chapter 13

Bellanore

A week has passed since I sought out Robb the morning after the travesty that had been the Red Night Ball. I tried calling Blood Haven Academy, like I had last year, to check on Romelia, my cousin. I wished to see if she was all right, of course, but everyone I spoke to refused to tell me anything until I gave my name. Whenever they would hear Bellanore Shade, they wouldn't hear another word. I guess Blood Haven is under lockdown too, unsurprisingly, and even though Shade is a demonic surname rather than a werewolf one, they don't even want to deal with demons. Again, that's not too surprising.

Using Ember, a werewolf name, won't help my chances of learning anything either, and I'm a demon. Even if I weren't, I would have no qualms lying to learn about my cousin.

Which is why, when I call, this time, I pretend to be someone else.

"Hello, I am Bella Grimm, a representative from HEX Unite. I was hoping to talk to one of your students."

"Certainly. Which one?" the receptionist asks.

"Romelia Covenshade."

"Right now, she's in class. Can you leave a number?"

I exhale. "I take it that she wasn't involved in the, ah, altercation between Moonstone Academy, then?"

"She was in the infirmary for a while. I don't know much more than that. I can't say for certain that she was injured then."

"Now, now, vampires are made of stern stuff, aren't they?" I ask, infusing a hint of dryness to my tone even though I'm both upset and relieved. To be back in class means she recovered, but why had Romelia been involved?

"Yes, of course."

"It should take a good deal of something to require a vampire to be at your infirmary. Hmm. On second thought, perhaps I do not need to speak with her."

I hang up before he can protest.

Hopefully, he won't tell her about the call considering it was

nothing more than a farce. It's a bit alarming that she had been involved in the fight in some capacity, and she had been hurt badly enough to not heal right away.

The claws. The poison.

Robb did what he could to try to prevent vampires from dying, but vampires had. Werewolves had. It wasn't his fault he hadn't realized that other poisons were used. I found out from Ellamaria that Nia hadn't acted entirely alone. Andre Pennington had been involved heavily. Between my heavy course load—I'm taking six classes instead of the typical four just because I want to be pushed as much as possible—and trying to figure out what Dad's up to, as well as Robb, I've been stretched too thin to realize what Nia and Andre planned. Not only that, but I forgot all about Andre when I told Robb last year that I was the only demonic werewolf in attendance. Andre's brother comes here too. Chandler, I think. I've been keeping an eye on him, but so far at least, Nia's not going toward him. She's also not in mourning, even though Ellamaria told me the two had been dating.

It's funny. Nia is a full-blooded werewolf, but I think she might be more demonic than I am. She certainly doesn't seem capable of love.

I can't help admiring Robb. He's still trying to live despite his curse, and not only that, he's trying to make a difference.

If I could, I would change places with him. I would suffer the curse so that he could live. He has his entire future ahead of him. Alines are strong and fierce, and it makes me want to cry to think about him being the last one. Once he dies, there won't be any more Alines, and the world will be worse off.

If he's willing to fight and do everything he can to make the world a better place, I can do the same, but what can I do?

You know what? I'm going to try to talk to Nia again. I probably won't be able to change her mind, but if I can learn what she's planning, see what she's up to, maybe then I can counter her. Talking to her alpha hadn't stopped her any, which doesn't surprise me. She needs to be stopped, and that won't happen by her alpha or the headmaster.

Which means it's up to the students to reject her.

Or for HEX Unite to step it up and take her to Magical Prison. It'll get to the point that they'll have to do something despite her age. She's going too far. Her actions are killing people, and yes, it's small scale currently, but that won't always be the case. Eventually, the war will grow and grow to the point that we're going to risk outing ourselves to the humans, which can't happen.

Nia has to be stopped.

Before I can head over to Nia's castle to see if she's there, my phone rings.

It's Dad.

"Yes?" I ask a bit testily.

"Are you busy?" he asks smoothly, as if we never fought, not ever through my entire life.

"Yes," I repeat.

"If you're worried that I'm calling you because of wanting to continue your training, that's not it."

"Then why are you calling?" I can't help being curious. Did he learn about the fight? Is he worried about me?

Doubtful. He's more apt to ask if I killed any vampires.

"Can we meet?"

"Dad…"

"This won't take long."

He sounds eager, desperate almost, which makes me wary. What is going on?

"Fine," I spit out. "Where?"

"The house."

The house. It's not a home. It's not the home that the three of us used to live in. That house has been abandoned. Once Mom left us both, Dad moved me into another house. It's a bit barren, with just enough furnishing so that none of the rooms are empty, but there aren't any paintings or drawings.

When I was little, I used to draw some scenes, mostly whatever I dreamed of that night. Once, after a nightmare about Hell, I drew a fire. Mom freaked out, and I never drew anything ever since.

For a time, the only drawing in this house had been that fire. Dad hung it above the fireplace, but I "lost" it because it reminded me of Mom's outburst. She literally asked me what was wrong with me that I would draw something so terrible.

So demonic. That's what she almost said.

That was the start of her drawing back away from me. The signs are so easy to see now. Hindsight really is twenty-twenty.

I hang up, and I teleport to the house, now standing in front of the fireplace. There's still no picture above it, and I turn around to see my dad near the dining room table.

"What do you want?" I ask, crossing my arms.

"I would love to have you stay for dinner," he says.

I roll my eyes. "Not hungry."

"I don't have to be the one to cook it. We can go to any restaurant you want, anywhere you want in the world. You always said you wanted to go to Italy. You do know that real Italian food is nothing like what they serve—"

"I'm honestly not hungry, Dad."

He appraises me and then nods curtly. "I know that things between

us have been a bit… contentious lately, and I hate that."

"Do you now?" I ask coolly. "Hate does come so naturally to your kind."

"My kind is your kind," he says with a devilish grin. "My point is that you need to realize that I'm in your corner." He takes a step toward me. "I'm the only one in your corner."

I stare at him, at his dark hair, his dark glowing eyes. He's strong, muscular like a bodybuilder.

Dad claps and then holds out his hands. "What do you want? Not to eat. You can have anything you want materialistically."

"That so?" I ask skeptically. "It's not my birthday."

"I want to treat you."

"Hmm. You going to steal whatever it is I want?"

"Do you know how old I am? I have money."

It's easy to think that long-lived demons have as much money as they want, that they can do what they want, but what they want, but Dad hasn't acted extremely wealthy for my entire lifetime. Why is that? Had he been poor? What could he have done to lose all of his money? How is it that he can offer me anything I want now?

"Anything you want at all," Dad says almost eagerly. "Everything you want. You want to live in a castle? The deed can be in your name. How large? Do you want one with two towers or three? A courtyard?"

"A castle? Seriously, Dad? Who wants to live in a castle?" I narrow my eyes, confused and wary. He seems to be extravagantly rich.

"Anything at all," he stresses, his lips twisting into what just might be a sincere smile.

Fine. He wants me to name something? I'll name something.

"How much would it cost to hire a necromancer?" I ask.

Dad's smile remains, only now it turns sardonic. His eyes flash, changing from black to red. He's livid.

"That is what you want?" he snaps. Spit flies out of his mouth.

"If not a necromancer, then how about you just give me some money?"

"For what?"

"Does it matter?"

"Considering you wanted to employ a demon… Why would you want to even talk to a necromancer?" Dad demands.

I shrug idly. "It doesn't much matter now, does it? Since you won't pay me—"

"Who do you want to become a zombie?"

"An enemy," I growl.

He blinks a few times and then barks a bitter laugh. "That is not what you want, and you know it."

I shrug. "Maybe, maybe not."

“You still didn’t say what you want money for,” he says.

“I want to hire a witch.”

Dad’s scowl deepens. “No.”

“Why not?”

“Why can’t you ask for a car? A potion? Something like that?”

“Fine. You want to know what I really want, Dad?” I ask.

He nods. “Of course, Bellanore. I only ever want to help you.”

It’s not quite a lie, but it’s not quite the truth either.

“I need your help. I…” I blow out a breath. “Will you help me to get a demon to lift a curse placed on a friend?”

“Why? Why do you need a demon to help you? Why can’t I? Is that why you need a necromancer?”

He doesn’t give me a chance to say anything, though. He starts to rant and rave.

“You’re nothing but an ungrateful wench, you know that?” he yells with a snarl. “I offer to buy you anything you want, but that’s not good enough for you. You’re just like your worthless mother, always wanting more, always wanting to change me, unwilling to accept who I am. You can’t even accept who you are! You’re worthless, pathetic, a terrible—”

I’ve heard more than enough, and I teleport away. His words shouldn’t cut me as deeply as they do, but he meant every word. He wasn’t lying. He wanted to hurt me, to cut me deeply.

And as much as I try to lie to myself and pretend that he didn’t hurt me, I’m not that good of a liar.

So much for trying to stop Nia or for trying to help Robb.

Can I have a do-over today?

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Chapter 14

Bellanore

Slowly, I try to center myself, to calm down, and I angrily wipe my tears away only to realize where I teleported myself to.

To my home.

To the house I grew up in.

In my haste to get away from my dad, I somehow ended up here. Previous to today, I hadn't even thought of this place in forever.

It's a beautiful, cozy little home, with three bedrooms, two bathrooms. A dining room offshoot from the kitchen. The walls are all painted a faintly yellow, off-white shade that brightens each room and makes them appear larger than they are.

I'm in the living room, and I head over to the dining room. Unlike the house Dad moved me to, this place has a lot of the paintings up yet, including one that Mom did that hangs above the fireplace. It's the moon shining over a silver pond, the moon's reflection in the gentle waves. I've always loved that painting. Just looking at it now brings me peace, but only for a moment. It's stupid for me to, but I miss her so much. My mom used to be the one I went to when I would fall out of a tree and skin my knee. If I got hurt and started to bleed, I would seek her out to wash and bandage the wound. She would ask me what happen, not judge me, and never act as if I were stupid or foolish even though I was the reason why I got hurt in most of the instances.

She made me feel safe.

Now, she just makes me feel sad. And angry. Furious. Depressed.

My mom abandoned me because I wasn't good enough. I was too demonic for her.

When I was little, Mom was happy. She had been happy here, not just with me but also with Dad. At one time, I thought they loved each other. As for Dad, well, he hasn't been with anyone else after Mom, and as far as I know, they aren't divorced. They're just separated.

Does she even think about me anymore?

I head back to the living room and realize that all of the photos of

the happy family we once were have been taken down. I guess that's not too surprising.

I head upstairs. My room is just like I left it. Dad allowed me to take whatever I wanted from the room, but I left a fair amount here, more than I initially thought. I always assumed this place had been sold. Why wasn't it?

Is Mom here? Does she live here yet?

Even though I try to temper my expectations, I rush to my parent's room. I knock, but when there's no answer, I open the door.

It's empty. Completely empty. No bed, no curtains, nothing at all. It's the only room to have nothing in it yet.

Defeated, I head to the kitchen. There, above the breakfast nook, is a picture of the three of us. I'm smiling up at my parents. Mom's smiling at Dad, and he's smiling at the camera. I'm maybe six in the picture. It's crazy to think that was eleven years ago.

"Mom, where are you?" I ask as my fingers hover above the glass over her face.

Tears prickle my eyes. I shut them, and the tears trickle down my cheek. I'm calm despite the inner anguish. All I want is a chance to be reunited with Mom, the opportunity to ask her what I did wrong, and the ability to apologize if I did something to make her leave.

"Mom, please, come back. I… I'm lost. I don't know what to do. I'm scared. Dad…"

She didn't leave because of me. It had to have been because of Dad.

Or maybe because he was training me, so I am partially to blame.

Does she know what Dad's involved in? Is that why she left, but why didn't she take me with her? Why did she leave me too?

She didn't just leave me, though. She turned the entire pack against me except for Ellamaria. As much as I want to believe that Mom's issues are with Dad, that's not the truth, and I know it.

I sniff, angrily brush my tears away, and teleport to my room. Instead of staying there, I head to Ellamaria's room. She's not there, but she's heading my way as I go down the hallway.

"Bellanore," she says, greeting me with a smile before her lips tug downward. "What's wrong?"

"I need some good news," I tell her. "Do you have any?"

"No."

I grimace. "I really need some."

"Fine." She loops our arms. "Let's go and make some."

"What do you have in mind?"

"No idea, but let's go take a stroll around campus."

We leave the castle, and as we head toward the center of campus, I just stop walking.

“I really need to talk to my mom,” I blurt out.

Ellamaria eyes me. “What do you need to talk to her about? Can I help any?”

“Help me be able to talk to her,” I say desperately. “If I reach out, she’ll ignore me, but if you…”

Ellamaria hangs her head. “She’ll lose faith in me,” she mumbles.

I stiffen and remove my arm from hers. “Her faith in you is more important than our friendship?” I ask.

“No…”

My shoulders slump, and I hang my head. “The pack ties are stronger with her than with me. I get it. Soon enough, I’ll be completely alone without a pack, and who knows what’ll happen to me then.”

“You can talk to me about anything,” Ellamaria says, her tone as anxious as mine. “Is it about Robb?”

“No. Yes. A little.”

“I know I don’t have a lot of dating experience, but I can still give you a listening ear. Two even.” She smiles wanly.

“Admit it,” I say sadly. “You’re only friends with me out of obligation.”

“What? No—”

“You’re afraid of what will happen if even you go against me, if you turn tail away.” My entire body feels like I’ve been encased in ice. “Please tell me I’m wrong.”

“Bellanore, we’ve been friends forever. We’re always going to be friends.”

She’s telling the truth, but I can’t help feeling like there’s something else there. As much as I don’t want to push her away, I want the truth, and I can’t stop myself from digging.

“Yes, but you feel obligated to me, don’t you? Did…” I suck in a breath. “Did my mom ask you to spend time with me?”

“No, your mom didn’t ask me to spend time with you,” Ellamaria says softly, but she won’t look me in the eye.

“So you do feel obligated,” I press.

“No!”

I close my eyes. It’s so murky and unclear, and it’s plainly evident that she’s not telling the complete truth.

“You don’t have to help me talk to my mom,” I say as I open my eyes. “I’ll find a way to talk to her myself.”

Ellamaria clings to my arm. “You don’t want to see her.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to snap at her that she can’t tell me what I do and don’t want, but I force myself to remain as even-tempered as possible. “Why not?”

“She’s not the same.”

“Not the same? What do you mean?”

“She doesn’t talk much. She’s quiet, withdrawn.”

“But you said she went to that baby shower or whatever it was for your sister.”

Ellamaria shrugs and rubs the back of her neck. “Yes, she came, but she didn’t speak much. She’s…”

“She’s as isolated as a werewolf can be in a pack,” I suppose.

“Yes!” Ellamaria nods vigorously, but there’s a hint of sadness in her eyes. “You’re a lot like her. You push me away like your mom pushes mine away. We both want to be there for you and not out of obligation. Not out of some sense of duty. We… I don’t know. I’m grateful that we’re friends. I appreciate and value you. There are times when I feel like I get lost in the shuffle. I mean, I have so many siblings, and it sometimes feels like I get overlooked at home. With you, I’m your best friend. I would never do anything to lose you, so if you want to go see your mom, I’ll make it happen. I’ll find a way.”

“Now.”

“Now?” she repeats. “All right. Let’s go.”

“To your place?” I ask, figuring she’ll have her mom call my mom over.

“No. We aren’t going to give her a chance to back out,” Ellamaria says firmly. “You, ah, might want to teleport us off campus.”

I grin and grab her hand, but then I pause. “Thank you,” I say, my tone soft. “And I owe you an apology. I’ve been so messed up between everything with Robb, my dad, my mom… I didn’t even realize you were hurting.”

“I just wish you trusted me enough to tell me what’s going on, but I understand that sometimes, a girl just needs her mom.” Ellamaria smiles wanly. “I almost feel like I need mine more too, but I also want my independence, too, you know?”

“I do know,” I murmur even though independence isn’t all that it’s cracked up to be, especially for werewolves where complete and total independence is an impossibility.

I teleport us to an alley in a nearby human city, where we get an Uber to drive us closer to our destination. Ellamaria leads the way, and I hate that I don’t even know my mom’s address.

But when we reach the house, I see a brown furry animal rushing away from the back of the house.

My mom.

She won’t even face me. She smelled our approach, and she just upped and fled.

I don’t think there can be a clearer message than that. My mom truly wants nothing to do with me. She can’t even bear the thought of looking me in the eye.

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Chapter 15

Robb

All I want is peace, but I don't think there is any peace to be had. The world is crashing down all around me, and I can barely keep my head above water. I don't want to worry Bellanore any, but my heart has been speeding up at times to the point that I can't catch my breath. It feels like my heart is trying to burst out of my chest. It's terrifying. The curse is going to kill me. If I had just gone for the drow's throat…

But, no. With his last breath, he had to go and curse me so that I can't join another pack. If my pack can't be revived, I will die.

Why can't the demon just resurrect one of my packmates? Then, the curse would be broken, and the two of us can…

Can what? Kill Bellanore's dad? That's a sure way to win her back.

Not that she seems all that interested in getting back together, considering we don't see each other every day like we used to. Without her in my life, it's so easy for the depression to settle in deep. My bones feel like they're filled with enough guilt and agony that it's a wonder that I can get up each morning.

Bellanore helped me to move forward with my life. The hope that I could maybe defeat the curse pushed me to ignore the grief from losing my family, from losing my pack, but let's be honest. Yes, I came to Moonstone Academy so I could learn who was Ronath's child, but I never even asked around about him when I came here. I was already not strong enough to tackle a demon.

And after killing that drow and the terrible curse he inflicted, I'm not sure I have it in me to kill anyone else.

Not even a demon.

Especially not a demon.

I won't stand a chance.

But that's not all. There's chaos all the way around, chaos and destruction. The werewolves and vampires have found ways to fight each other despite both campuses being on lockdown. There hasn't been a major battle, not since the night of the Red Moon Ball, and I have to wonder if that's because the werewolf students are

preoccupied by the upcoming Grand Hunt.

Imagine my surprise when Bellanore heads my way. Her head is low, her hair falling forward to cover her face, but when she stands before me, she lifts her head to reveal her amazing eyes. She's been teased about them before, and they are different. They're unique and stunning. They're just jealous that their eyes don't glow.

Although mine have only started to glow since the curse came upon me. I'd much rather my eyes no longer glow, but for that to happen, I'll have succumbed to the curse.

"How are you feeling?" she murmurs.

"Like you care," is on the tip of my tongue, but I swallow back the hurtful words. My emotions have been a trial to overcome, and I assume it's the Mystic Twilight that's to blame.

Instead, I mutter, "I'm alive yet, so there's that."

"Each day is a gift."

"Each day is a curse," I spit out. "It's agony and pain and…"

She flinches.

"Sorry," I mumble.

"Don't apologize. I asked a stupid question and followed up with a stupid line. I deserved it."

"No, you didn't." I shut my eyes and run a hand through my hair.

Her fingers brush against my eyelid, along the scar, and I suck in a breath. It hurts sometimes, the scar, as if I can feel the cut all over again. It bled so badly that all I could see through that eye had been red. I almost thought I would go blind, but luckily, it barely scratched my eye. The deepest part of the blow had been just above and right below the orb, thankfully. Otherwise, I would've lost the eye.

When she lowers her hands, I open my eyes. I expect to see pity in her eyes, and I ready myself to feel anger and frustration at the sight, but all I see is an emotion I can't name but takes my breath away regardless.

Or maybe that's just the curse because I can't breathe.

In a panic, I turn my back to her and try to focus on counting, on taking one breath at a time, inhaling however much oxygen I can get until I can breathe easier again.

"A panic attack?" Bellanore asks gently as she circles around to stand in front of me again.

"Maybe," I mumble. The thought hadn't occurred to me.

"Because I touched…" She grimaces. "I can't do anything right," she adds softly, maybe talking to herself more than to me.

"You're fine. I'm the one who…" A lump in my throat strangles anything I might say, and when I next swallow, I choke and cough as a result. My own body is like a prison. I can't even feel happy that Bellanore's come to see me. I'm robbed of my emotions. I'm barely

hanging on, and each day, I question what I'm doing.

Ronath.

Me.

Why should he live? He's a demon. He's done terrible things.

But I'm no saint either, and yes, I killed the drow out of self-defense, but I also killed out of anger, out of hatred. He killed my loved ones, and I wanted him to die.

My own emotions then overwhelmed me to the point that I didn't recognize myself, and now my emotions are not even my own but still trending toward evil, toward anger, toward hatred.

I hate Ronath, and I don't even know him. He's the obstacle preventing me from living my best life with my family by my side once more.

But if I go against him, I'll die.

And if I don't go against him, I'll die.

Even if I somehow go against him and survive, I'll have killed my love's father. She'll never forgive me. Yes, she doesn't always see eye-to-eye with him, but who agrees with their parents over everything? It's one thing to fight and be angry with your father. It's another for him to be killed.

And for the sake of another demon. Why Zaun won't move against Ronath himself, I don't know. Is the demon afraid of Ronath? If so, how can the demon actually believe that I can have a hand in Ronath's death? I can't, not when I'm this on edge, this close to the tipping point.

My love's father.

My love.

Do I love Bellanore? Is it possible for me to feel love?

Or do I wish I can feel love and assume that if I wasn't closed off to that emotion, I would feel it?

"You're the one who what?" Bellanore asks.

I smirk. "I don't even know what I was going to say," I confess.

"My beauty leaves you speechless, I see," she teases, smiling.

"I didn't think you were so vain."

"Well, you know how it goes. When you're a demon, you tend to just… You tend to think overly highly about yourself."

"You're right, though. You are beautiful."

"Thank you. I don't mean to fish for compliments, though."

She's blushing and looking away. Unreal. She's embarrassed.

I burst out laughing. "You don't have to be embarrassed."

"I'm not," she protests.

"Don't lie to me."

"I'm not," she protests.

I lift my eyebrows.

“Well… Fine,” she huffs. “I don’t want to talk about my looks.”

“Why not?”

“You won’t think I’m so beautiful after you hear this.”

I shrug and cross my arms. “Hear what? I don’t see how you can say anything that would change the fact that you’re beautiful, but go ahead.”

“My dad wanted to see me.”

I still.

“He asked me to name anything materialistic that I wanted. At first, I brushed it off, but then I started to think…”

I bite my tongue so I don’t say anything I might regret.

“I asked him… Well, I ended up asking him for help.”

I swallow hard and suppress a cough. “Did you ask him to just roll over and die?”

She scowls. “No. I asked him how much it would cost to hire a necromancer.”

“You didn’t.”

“I did. And he refused, so I asked for money to hire a witch—”

“A witch can’t do what needs to be done,” I yell. “A witch can’t bring back a person’s mind, body, and soul! I can’t have my family back as a zombie!”

“I know that, but I thought—”

“You didn’t think. You can’t be serious, Bellanore. Do you think I’m stupid? I already considered finding another necromancer. There isn’t one.”

“Robb, I know you’re upset—”

My eyes flash, and my fingers curl into tight fists. “I don’t like that condescending tone.”

“And I don’t appreciate your willingness to play a martyr,” she snaps. “What happened to the Robb who killed the drow because the drow killed his family? You need to fight! Be a fighter! Don’t take this lying down!”

“So you want your father to die? I’m supposed to kill him, but if you’re asking around about a necromancer gets out… if he starts to dig…”

“I don’t want you or him to die,” she says firmly. “Is that so terrible of me?”

I wearily wipe a hand down my face. “I get that, but if something doesn’t change and soon, werewolves and vampires will die. More werewolves and vampires. Not just me.”

“That’s all you’re worried about? You need to be concerned about your own life!”

“There’s no way for me to win,” I tell her. “All I can do is try to live out the rest of my life in such a way that I’ll end up in Heaven so I

can rejoin my family. That's all there is for me."

"No, Robb, there—"

"There isn't," I snap, "and the sooner you accept that, the better off you'll be."

"I can't believe you're just going to give up!"

"What do you want from me?" I roar. "Do you want me to kill your dad?"

"Of course not, but—"

"There is no other way. Don't waste your time worrying about me. I've made my peace."

"No, you haven't."

"Don't tell me what I have and haven't done," I growl.

"You can't look me in the eye and tell me you're ready to die."

I grab her shoulders, stare her straight in the eye, open my mouth…

And no words come out.

A smirk quirks her lips. "Can't do it, huh?"

"I'm ready to die," I tell her quietly.

She narrows her eyes and then shakes her head. "You're lying to yourself."

I grit my teeth. "What do you want from me, Bellanore?"

"To fight the curse!"

"The drow is dead. There's no way for the curse to be undone unless I kill your dad. If I kill your dad, I'll end up going to Hell. He'll be waiting for me there. Not exactly what I want, and what if Zaun lied? What if he doesn't resurrect my pack? Then I would've killed your dad and lost you, and for what? For nothing. My soul will be doomed—"

"Do you honestly think my dad wouldn't fight you back? It would be—"

"Is it self-defense if I start the fight with the intention of killing him?" I grumble. "I don't think so, and don't forget—I went after Dural."

"But the drow wanted to kill you anyhow," she protests. "That really was self-defense!"

"And if I go after your dad?"

"You could easily start a fight and provoke him verbally."

"But the intention would be to kill him, and honestly, do you see me winning?"

She grimaces.

"Why are you even arguing with me about this?" I continue. "You want a miracle. Well, I don't see any angels around, and let's face it. I'm not going to be able to kill your dad."

"Robb…"

“Witches can’t help me. No one can.”

I turn away from her, but I can’t help but wonder at that. Demons. Who are their enemies?

Angels.

Will an angel be willing to help me?

Too bad I don’t know any, and the chances of one being willing to help a cursed werewolf aren’t too high either, even if my task to become uncursed is to vanquish a demon.

Might not be worth the effort to locate an angel.

My eyes close, and I turn away from Bellanore. I don’t open my eyes again until I hear her walk away.

My eyes open, but Bellanore tricked me. She’s standing before me, and she places a hand on my cheek.

“We’ll find a way,” she promises.

I snort. “Now who’s lying to who?”

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Chapter 16

Robb

My classes aggravate me. If it weren't for the whole curse thing, I might actually enjoy them, and that only sets me off all the more. Professor Louis and I can talk for hours, and I might've thought about asking him about demons, but I never do. I almost feel like that would ruin the friendship we've built. There's trust there, given that we hardly ever end up talking about history. We talk about the state of the human world, of the fighting between werewolf and vampires and what it might take to get that to end once and for all. Neither of us thinks that's possible in our lifetimes. Too many feel like Nia does and want all vampires to die just because they're not completely dead dead.

Professor Darrow isn't the nicest of teachers, but he's sharp, and his vision is unparalleled. I almost wonder if his lack of Mystic Twilight is some of the reason why he's able to see details that I still can't yet. Maybe I'll never be able to see what he can. It's almost freaky that I can start to almost see through walls now when I try hard enough. X-Ray vision? No, not nearly, but I can see so much more.

Physically. I can't see emotions, and I can't sense auras. Professor Darrow once mentioned that Bellanore and some demons can see auras around a person, and I wonder if that's how she's able to deduce if a person is lying or not. I can't really say.

Zoolingualism is my favorite. Sterling hates me, and I think the rest of the birds do too, but Otso loves me almost as much as he does Professor Hyde. We spend the entire time he's teaching the class I'm to be in together. The bear cub is still small yet, and I can't help but wonder what's going to happen to him once he grows. A fully grown bear can't stay in the professor's office forever. And he's far too tamed to live out in the wild. Maybe Professor Hyde shouldn't have taken the cub in, but unless the cub found a momma bear to take him in, he might've died.

Even bears have packs to some extent. Otso's new pack consists of Professor Hyde and me. Too bad that won't help the wolf in me.

I almost want to see how Otso will react to my wolf. Not that I'm certain I even can transform into my wolf, and maybe I shouldn't. What if one of these times, I transform into my wolf and then can't return to human form? I don't want to live the rest of my short life as a wolf. Don't get me wrong. Being a wolf is entirely freeing, but I want my mind. I want my body.

I want to be able to feel Bellanore touch my face, even my scar, and I want to kiss her again.

Even if it's just a kiss goodbye.

It's time for me to head on over to Professor Hyde's office. He's figured out that I don't want any of the students around ever, so he knows I show up before his class starts to take over. On a few occasions, like today, I can hardly get up. Those days, I'm late, and he'll lock Otso in his office so he can't escape. Yes, that means I have a key to get in.

As I hurry through the deserted campus, I put a hand in my pocket. The key feels unusually heavy, and for some reason, even my legs feel heavy. It's as if I'm walking in slow motion. For whatever reason, today, I just feel burned out. I feel like I can't even try to be myself.

I'm stuck in a terrible loop of some kind, and I can't break free.

Or maybe my mind is going. I don't know. I'm not sure what's going on with my body anymore, but it almost doesn't feel like it's mine anymore. It's just… It's a body, but it doesn't always do what I want.

It's a prison, that's what it is, and death will release me from the fleshy prison, but to what end? I won't be free of torment even then. No, I'll be sentenced to Hell and be separated from my family for all time, or else I'll go to Heaven and be potentially separated from Bellanore for all time. Is Heaven a possibility for her given that she's a half-demon? She's not evil. She even loves her demonic father.

My thoughts are all twisted up in knots, just like my heart, and I stagger, nearly tripping over a rock concealed by the tall grass.

A low chuckling has me whirling around, and I have to hold out my arms to steady myself so I don't fall down anyhow.

Roald Jagger is heading my way. Trailing him are Decker Winds and Elliot Snowball. The leader and Elliot both wear matching smirks. Decker's gaze is on the ground as if he doesn't want to be here.

If he doesn't want to be here, why not leave? He doesn't have to listen to Roald. Decker has his mind, and his body isn't a prison. He can do whatever he wants.

But Roald—and Nia for that matter—like to prey on the outcasts, the misfits, the ones who don't feel like they fit in. A new pack. Bah. Roald couldn't be an alpha. He's too weak, too needy. He needs to have people look up to him, and that alone is reason enough for him

to not be alpha. A true alpha has everyone else's interests above his or her own. All Roald cares about is himself.

And all Nia cares about is killing vampires and convincing other werewolves to do the same.

So far, almost this entire second year, I've been able to avoid Roald and his cronies. I haven't forgotten that I made him bleed, and I still have the scar he gave me on my chest. I've been doing the assignments and projects just to avoid seeing them, and now they're here. Why? Just a bad day on my part? Can my luck get any worse?

"Where's Nia?" I ask.

"She's probably being a good little werewolf and attending class," Elliot says. He starts to laugh.

Not sure what's so funny, but then I've never liked Elliot. He's an idiot.

Decker's the one who disappoints me, though. Maybe he senses that because he won't look at me.

Roald clears his throat and stops at the base of the slight hill I'm standing on. "You haven't been a good werewolf at all then. You never go to class."

"I've been attending. I still go here." I shrug, trying not to let my hackles raise. The last thing I want is a fight. Three versus one? No thanks. At least last time, Roald and I had been the only ones to go at it. I have a feeling Roald doesn't like that I drew blood, and he wants to return the favor.

No thank you.

"You aren't welcome here," Roald says with a low hiss.

"You welcomed me when I first came here. What's changed, Roald? Don't' like that I don't bow down to you? You aren't my alpha, and I'm not going to ever consider you as anything but worthless."

"Your opinion doesn't mean anything," Elliot snaps. "You wish you could have an alpha like Roald."

I burst out laughing. "Elliot, you're a fool. Roald's no alpha, and he might talk a big talk, but he doesn't know how to walk, and he sure doesn't know how to fight."

"I don't know how to fight?" Roald stalks toward me, only stopping when he's slightly upper up on the hill than I am. He bumps his chest into mine. "I do believe I gave you another scar. Want me to give you another? Maybe have your eyes match? Cut off an ear?"

"Just don't send it to your girlfriend," I jest.

"What's he talking about?" Elliot asks Decker.

Decker smirks at me. "Roald doesn't paint."

Roald glances at him. "The hell you going on about? I can paint. I'll paint with Robb's blood. How does that sound?"

"You don't want to do this," I warn Roald.

“Oh, but that’s where you’re wrong.” Roald clangs his canines together. “The guards won’t let us out anymore. I haven’t been able to fight a vampire in two days, and I’m itching for a fight. You’ll do.”

I don’t. I don’t want anything to do with them, and I wish I could teleport and be anywhere else but here.

My heart begins to flutter, picking up. Blood thunders in my ears, and I can’t hear what Roald is saying. His lips are moving, but I can’t make out even one word, and then he punches me hard in the gut.

I block his next blow, but Elliot—I assume it’s Elliot—slams his fist into my kidney. I jerk to the side, wincing, and try to grab Roald’s shoulder to knock him off balance, but Elliot grabs my arms. I think he’s shouting something. I can feel his breath against my ear. Maybe he’s trying to find out why Decker’s not helping.

As much as I can, I struggle to break free of Elliot’s hold. I can’t, though. He has my arms out, his curled around mine up around my shoulders, his hands locked behind my head. I go to throw my head back to hopefully headbutt him hard enough to loosen his grip so I can break free, but Roald is starting to pummel me with jabs and crosses to my chest and midsection. I can’t block any of them, but the moment Roald winds up to give me a hook punch to the head, he leaves his stomach and chest wide open.

Using Elliot to balance me, I bring up my leg and kick Roald as hard as I can. My boot connects with his gut, and he starts to go down, and I kick again, his face meeting my foot. Blood gushes everywhere, spewing from his nose, but Roald just stares me down. He holds up his hand.

His fingers are claws.

Claws he rakes down my chest.

Claws he brings down again and again.

Claws he slices my clothes and skin with.

I can hardly breathe as blood rains down onto the grass. Decker is yanking on Roald’s arm, and Elliot drops me. I’m not sure who kicks my back or who steps on me, but I can feel the vibrations in the earth as they race away.

Decker didn’t do me any favors. He might not have hit me himself, but he left me to die just like the others.

Bellanore won’t have to worry about her dad anymore.

He’ll be fine.

She won’t have to worry about me either.

I’ll be dead.

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Chapter 17

Bellanore

I'm not sure when I started to do this, but I've been testing my aura-reading powers to see if I can sense emotions from greater and greater distances. That's how I first learned that Ellamaria has a crush. I could sense her heightened anxiety, her embarrassment, her lightheartedness. I still haven't asked her who she likes yet, and she hasn't said. Makes me wonder if she's afraid to tell me because she doesn't know where I stand with Robb.

Honestly, I don't know where I stand with Robb.

I'm in my weather immunity class. Professor Gremma offered to let me out of it early if I do some kind of crazy stunt with her, and I've been thinking about it. So far, I've just been doing the lessons day by day. It's too bad that fireballs don't ever rain down from the sky. Maybe then I could finally get over my fear of fire.

Not that I want fire to come down from the sky. That would be utterly terrifying and would probably make my fear that much worse.

Of course, outside of Ellamaria, the one person I concentrate on the most is Robb, and when I feel a flash of fear and then acceptance, I know something is terribly wrong.

Without thinking, I stand.

"Going somewhere?" Professor Gremma asks me dryly.

"Yes."

"You cannot walk out that door."

"Try to stop me."

Her eyes narrow. "Do you want to fail?"

I eye her. "Go ahead and fail me. You wanted me to test out of your class already, and you and I both know I can handle any kind of weather already. This class is a waste of my time."

Her nostrils flare. "You better—"

"You need to teach them," I tell her, pointing to the rest of the class. "There's a storm coming, and it's going to rain blood. Not just vampire blood. Werewolf blood. We need to know as much as possible, so fine, I'll take whatever challenge you want me to face to

test out of this course. Make it even harder now just to punish me. I don't care."

She calls after me, but I bolt out of there, racing and then teleporting away. I'm far from the castles that contain our classes, but I'm not sure where Robb is. My eyes close, and I focus on him, on his emotions, but it's harder and harder to sense him. His aura is fading.

And then I feel him. It's just a flicker of… I'm not sure what, but it's enough for me to pinpoint his location, and I teleport there.

Robb is curled over on the grass, in a puddle of blood. I exhale slowly even though I want to chase down whoever did this and slaughter them.

Yes, slaughter them. A bit extreme of a reaction, maybe, but I am part demon.

It almost feels like someone else is the one to kneel beside him. I can hardly prevent my hands from shaking as I draw him into my arms. His breathing is slow, his pulse weak, and he groans as I shift him so that his head is in my lap.

"You're bleeding all over me," I admonish.

"Your fault," he rasps.

"My fault?" I ask as I appraise him. Should I remove his shirt? I'll have to see his wound.

"Yes. You moved me."

"Ah, so I should've left you in your bloody mess, huh?"

"Yes."

"Come now," I rebuke gently. "You know I wouldn't do that."

"Shouldn't you be in class?" he mumbles.

"Yes, but that's all right. You should've seen Professor Gremma's class. I just stood up."

"How did you know?" he asks.

"Can we worry about all of your silly questions later?" I ask. "I need to wash this, and maybe you should see a witch—"

"No witches," he says through gritted teeth.

"Fine," I grumble. "You're going to make me learn how to sew, aren't you? I never wanted to take up needlepoint, but now I'm going to have to thread your skin together."

"It'll be practice."

"Practice for what?"

"Ask me in a few months," he mumbles.

"Months?" I lift my eyebrows, torn between happiness that he thinks that he'll be around in months and also scared out of my wits that he won't be. "Can I at least teleport you to the cave?"

"No."

"No?"

His head rolls to the side, and I wait patiently as he struggles to

right it again so he can stare up at me. “No.”

“But—”

“I’m not sure I can handle that.”

“But—”

“I won’t die on the way,” he vows.

“You can’t promise that,” I protest. Tears sting my eyes.

I hate this.

I hate him.

I hate everything about this.

I yank off my cardigan. Then, I demand, “Close your eyes.”

He grunts, and I realize his eyes are already closed.

Quickly, I remove my buttoned-down white shirt and then put the cardigan back on. The shirt is a lot easier for me to tie around him. I don’t bother to remove his ruined clothing. For now, the materials can soak up his blood. I tied my shirt around him as tightly as I could to try to apply pressure.

“Lean against me,” I command.

“Who knew you were a drill sergeant in another life?” he mumbles.

It’s not that funny, but I laugh anyhow. It’s either laugh or cry, and I don’t want to cry right now. I can be strong for Robb. I know I can, but he’s hurt and in pain, and I just know even without asking that he’ll refuse to let me take his pain away. His anguish is causing me anguish, and I can’t do this. I can’t handle this anymore. How is he able to cope and deal with the fact that he’s dying?

But this isn’t because of the curse. This is something else altogether, and now, instead of anguish, I’m trembling with rage. A bit too harshly, I force Robb onto his feet. He grunts a little but doesn’t protest, and I drape his arm around the back of my neck, and I wrap my arm around his waist.

“Geez, you need to lay off the food,” I grumble. “What do you weigh?”

“All muscle, baby,” he huffs.

“Sure, it is.”

“You’re welcome to pinch my stomach or at least try to.”

I snort. “Not now.”

“Don’t want blood on your hands?” he asks.

I flinch at his word choice. “Let’s see if you can walk, all right?”

“Changing the subject, I see. Why? Blood and demons….”

“What do you want me to do?” I snap.

“Leave me be.”

He sounds a little stronger when he says that, but when I shift forward to see his face, he looks far too pale. He doesn’t want me to see him as weak. What a ridiculous notion.

“You are the strongest wolf I know,” I inform him. “You’re also half-wolf, half-pig.”

“Oh, yeah? Do I have a pig’s ass?”

“No, a pig’s head. You’re so pigheaded that you make me want to scream, and you pick fights like a bull that sees movement.”

He grunts. “If a bull sees me—”

“A bull would leave you be because you aren’t moving,” I inform him.

“The red—”

I snort. “Bulls react to the movement of the cape, not the color.”

“They can’t see any colors?”

“Not red,” I tell him.

“So they can see… what?”

I appraise him. “Your eyes.”

“Blue, huh? Can they see yours?”

“Yes, but I thought I said no more questions. You want more answers? Then you better start walking.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“What do you want me to call you?”

“How about my name?” I ask dryly.

“You need a nickname.”

“No, I really—”

“Princess of Light.”

We’ve been walking, just a few steps’ worth, but his words make me draw up short.

“What did you call me?” I ask coldly.

“Princess of Light,” he mumbles.

He’s leaning heavier and heavier on me. He’s lost too much blood, and he’s trying to walk, which means I have to, and he’s staggering along, unable to keep his feet in front of him.

My mind is racing. Is he making fun of me? Or am I reading too much into it? I’m probably overreacting. I know and understand the emotions Robb’s going through between the curse and even his abuse of Mystic Twilight. Sensing them allows me to tell what he’s dealing with, but that doesn’t make it any easier to handle the bitterness. He can be so argumentative at times, and I’m that way back to him. It’s not right or fair on my part. I should be able to rise above it all, but sometimes, he knows just how to get under my skin.

But this… that nickname…

“You don’t like it,” he mumbles.

“Let’s get you to the cave,” I say firmly.

For a few steps, we’re silent, but then he murmurs something I don’t quite make out.

“What was that?” I ask.

“You’re my light,” he says softly.

“I can’t be.”

“Why not? You aren’t a full-blooded demon.”

“I’m about ready to go full-blooded demon on Nia,” I growl.

He grunts. “She didn’t do this?”

“Who did?”

“No questions now,” he says in a faintly higher-pitched voice.

“Is that your impersonation of me?” I ask.

“Yes.”

“It’s terrible.”

“I’m sorry. Let’s try that again. ‘Robb, stop asking questions because I can’t help myself, and I’ll answer them anyhow.”

“You!” If I could, I would’ve playfully hit his shoulder. Instead, I squeeze around his hips, pulling him closer for a one-armed hug.

It’s happened. I tried to fight it, to ignore my feelings.

Doesn’t matter.

I’ve fallen for Robb Aline all over again.

And I can’t help him.

Well, I can help him with his injuries now, but the rest of it? Not so much.

I swallow hard. The scar on his chest from his fight with Roald, that injury shouldn’t have scarred. The curse must’ve done it. That suggests that all of these slashes will scar too, and I don’t know if I can handle seeing his skin marred like that. He’s too strong to have those lines of injury on his body.

Gradually, we make our way to the cave. I lie Robb down on the moss that’s mostly regrown, and I clean out the wounds as best as I can. Robb’s face is as white as freshly fallen snow. A human might say he looked like he saw a ghost or that he looked like a ghost, but ghosts aren’t white. They’re translucent.

Robb keeps repeating a word just under his breath, and once I finished washing the wounds, all eleven of the slashes, I lean back, my legs tucked under me, and I watch his lips.

Light. He keeps saying light.

I clear my throat. “I need to suture the wounds,” I tell him. “I’ll be right back.”

“Are you really going to use a needle and thread?”

“Since you’re refusing to see a witch, I don’t think I have another choice. Unless…” I tap a finger to my chin. “Do you think a fairy could heal you? Maybe I can go visit—”

“No. No fairies. No witches.”

“Martyr,” I grumble.

“The curse means someone is,” he retorts.

“Yes, yes,” I say in a huff. “You don’t have to remind me.”

“I can’t forget.”

I hang my head, teleport to Ellamaria’s room since she actually does know how to sew, swipe her sewing kit, and return to the cave. Just outside, I make a fire since the last thing I want is for Robb to be subjected to smoke inhalation.

Once the needle is red-hot from the fire, I return to Robb. The needle remains red, and I touch Robb’s hand.

“Please, let me take some of your—”

“No!”

I jerk back, surprised by the vehemence power of his denial. “Why not?” I ask gently.

He snorts. “So you can ask questions and expect answers, but I can’t?”

“You can ask me any question you want if you answer me this.”

Robb hangs his head. When he looks up at me, his eyes glow more than normal, and they’re so filled with wonder that it makes me inhale deeply.

“I don’t want you to overtax yourself.”

I furrow my brow. “I won’t,” I promise.

He rolls his eyes, but his lips curl into a rueful smile. “You’ll try to transfer the curse to you.”

“No,” I protest.

“You’ll tamper with it and maybe make things worse.”

I hesitate.

“I know you mean well, but just…” He inhales deeply, which causes one of the wounds to start to bleed all over again. “Go ahead.”

With tears in my eyes, I stitch him up. My hand trembles at first, but when he doesn’t react or flinch, my hand gets surer, and I finish faster than I would’ve thought possible.

Robb’s still the entire time, and I almost thought that maybe he somehow fell asleep, but he’s watching me as I lean back to appraise my handiwork. Most of the wounds weren’t that deep and might not have needed to be sewn shut, but I thought it best to do them all. Only two did I have to struggle to pull the skin together because they were larger, and one of those liked to bleed. All in all, I don’t think I did a terrible job.

“Don’t make me ever do that again,” I murmur.

He leans forward, grimaces, and wipes my tear away with his thumb. “I won’t.”

My heart skips a beat. He’s talking about the tear, about making me cry.

After him calling me his light, it’s too much, especially since some of the cruel kids have called me the princess of darkness before.

“So… you want to join me for the Grand Hunt?” I ask.

“The Grand Hunt?” he asks dumbly.

“It’s tomorrow night,” I remind him.

Robb bursts out laughing. “I’m so not up for that right now.”

“I suppose not.” I grin and pat his hand. “Do you want me to spend the night with you?”

“You think I’m going to die in my sleep?”

“No,” I say quickly, but I choke on the word. The lump in my throat is painful, and tears form in my eyes again.

“You’re not supposed to cry,” he grumbles. “When I—”

I carefully move him to the side so I can jump to my feet without risking bumping him. “Do you want me to get you some food? You should eat or, at the very least, drink.” I eye him reproachfully. “You should drink something *other* than Mystic Twilight.”

He chuckles weakly. “I just want to sleep, but, Bellanore, when I die—”

“Not when.”

“It’s always when. We all die eventually.”

“I know that. I just… I don’t want to talk about that.”

“When I die,” he continues, his voice faint but also forceful, “you aren’t allowed to cry over me.”

“If you think I’m going to host a party, you’re crazy.”

“No more…” A yawn cuts him off. “No more tears.”

“Then let me help you,” I say desperately.

“You can’t. There is no way to help me, so just…” He pats beside him, and I sit by him. He lays his head on my shoulder, and he’s asleep in seconds.

I stroke his cheek and hum a faint tune, not wanting to disturb him but also wanting to help him settle. I’ve never really thought about my death before, and I think most everyone wants to die in their sleep, a nice, peaceful death, but that’s not how it always goes.

For Robb, I want that. I want him to have as peaceful a death as possible.

But I also want that to be a hundred years from now, not tonight.

But I also don’t want my dad to die either.

Robb’s right. A witch won’t be able to lift the curse, not permanently, but maybe there’s something else that can be done to help stall it? Something safer than the Mystic Twilight?

I lean down and kiss Robb’s temple. He didn’t tell me who hurt him, but I’m sure it was Roald. The Grand Hunt is coming up, and I have a feeling that fool will take part. Maybe I should hunt him instead of the white hart and the other animals we’re meant to hunt…

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Chapter 18

Robb

When I wake, I can smell food. I don't want to eat, but Bellanore is hovering, and I know she's worried, so I force myself to choke down a few bites. And I do mean choke down. Swallowing is becoming a chore, and my chest burns. Each of the claw marks feels as if they're cutting deeper into my skin even as I sit there, and there's nothing to explain why I feel that way. The wounds are all still stitched, but I feel as if I can barely breathe. My breathing is labored, and I just feel terrible.

"You're so pale," Bellanore murmurs. She goes to hand me a cup, but then she holds it up to my mouth, and I drink. "Do you feel any better?"

The water is lukewarm and tastes disgusting. I must grimace unintentionally because she frowns and moves the cup toward her lap.

"I didn't know if cold water would be bad for you," she murmurs. "Robb, I don't…"

"What is it?" I ask, shifting some to get more comfortable. My body is all sore and stiff from sleeping in an awkward position last night.

"You aren't healing." She bites her lower lip.

I hate seeing her so worried, and I try to reach for her hand, but I miss. She almost smiles and places her hand on mine.

"It'll be fine. I'll be fine."

"But…"

"Do you like my scars? Do they make me seem mysterious?" I try to grin. "Some girls find them sexy, right?"

"I'm not some girl," she says stiffly. "I don't like that you're hurt and that you aren't healing."

"I'll heal. I'll scar, but I'll heal. It'll just take longer."

"It's like… It's like you're human," she says, her brow furrowed.

"Is that such a terrible thing?"

"It's not the worst thing in the world, no, but, Robb…"

I groan. "Don't nag."

“I’m not nagging. You want me to? I’ll start,” she warns.

“No, better not.”

“Why not?”

“Because.”

“Because why?”

“Don’t you know what guys do when women nag?”

“They stop listening.”

“Bingo.” I grin. “You don’t want me to stop listening to you, do you?”

She huffs and crosses her arms. “Um, when have you ever listened to me?”

“I’m offended. I listened to you…”

“Ha! You can’t say!”

I hold up a finger. “I heard you when you said, ‘I love you.’”

Bellanore’s eyes widen. “You didn’t say it back.”

“Because you weren’t supposed to fall in love with me. I was weak and frankly… terrified. You were amazing—”

“You didn’t seem to think so at first.”

I grin recklessly, trying to look and sound much better than I feel. “Who knew that first impressions are so vastly overrated?”

She giggles.

“It was one thing for me to fall for you, but you… I always knew how my story would end. I just thought it would’ve ended already.”

“Please, Robb, don’t say that,” she begs. “Let’s go. We can leave campus and see a witch about healing you. Maybe then you won’t scar. From there, we can—”

“You never got any money from your dad, so how would we pay this witch? You have a witch in mind? Because I don’t know any, and I don’t think I can risk trusting any.”

“Why not?” she asks. Her eyes go back and forth, staring intently at me as if searching for something deep inside me. I don’t know if she finds what she’s looking for or not, but she seems to relax a little.

“If they sense the curse, if they realize what I have to do… Not all witches are good.”

“And you’re worried that if I’m around, with my being a half-demon…”

“It’s not worth the risk involving more people,” I say to skirt around the issue.

She grimaces. “But—”

I make a show of looking at my wrist even though I don’t wear a watch. “Isn’t it time for you to be going?”

“No.”

“Yes.”

Bellanore inhales. “If you think I’m going to leave you—”

“Bellanore, you should do the Grand Hunt.”

“But—”

“If you say ‘but’ one more time…”

Her eyes don’t just glow. They sparkle. “You’ll what?” she asks with a wide grin.

“I’ll get back at you for all of those times you hit my arm or punched me.”

“Have I ever punched you?” she asks. “If I ever did, it was playful.”

“So it’s all right if a girl hits a guy playfully, but he can’t do the same?”

“Maybe.” She winks and goes to open her mouth but then shuts it.

I laugh. It feels so good to laugh even though I feel like…

I feel like I’m dying.

“You were about to say ‘but’ again, weren’t you?” I ask.

“You’ll never know.” She lifts her chin, but she can’t hide her smirk.

“There’s no reason why you shouldn’t have won the Grand Hunt last year,” I inform her.

“Using my demonic abilities would’ve been cheating,” she protests.

“You’re still an amazing hunter even without using them,” I point out.

She glances away. “I don’t like the idea of leaving you here alone. Maybe I can ask—”

“No.”

“Ellamaria—”

“Doesn’t like me.”

“That’s not true,” Bellanore protests.

“Does she know what’s going on between us?”

“Do we know what’s going on?” she counters softly.

“There’s nothing to know,” I say.

She winces. “You’re just trying to push me away,” she says.

“Why would you think that?” I ask faux innocently.

Bellanore rolls her eyes.

“You can’t tell me you don’t want to.”

“I do,” she admits.

“Then go.”

“But…”

I grin and rub my hands together.

She grins and then ducks her head. “I don’t like the idea of leaving you.”

“You said that already. That’s how you know a conversation is over, when it goes around and around in a circle. Don’t fight me. Go.”

Bellanore, unsurprisingly, makes no move to leave. She hasn’t left my side at all except to get food, but she’s teleporting, so that barely

counts as leaving. There weren't any classes today, so the students can prepare for the Grand Hunt tonight.

"I won't forgive you if you don't go," I inform her.

"I can live with that," she says with a shrug.

"I won't forgive myself if I'm the reason why you don't."

She juts out her chin. "That was low."

"No. What's low is using me as an excuse. You aren't going to go out there and show everyone what a skilled a hunter you are? Why? Are you scared that you aren't the best? Do you think a third year will beat you? Why don't you prove to everyone, including the bullies, that you shouldn't be messed with?"

Bellanore hangs her head.

"Are they still bullying you?" I ask.

I haven't been around to see it, so I honestly have no idea.

"It's not as bad as it was last year," she mumbles.

"So it is still going on."

"You don't need to concern yourself with that."

"Yes, I do. What happens to you happens to me."

"hmm. In that case, it seems like there is something between us."

My nostrils flare. "You're supposed to hate me."

"Sorry."

"Hate is what demons do."

"So cliché."

I grin. "You're impossible."

"Funny," she murmurs. "I was just thinking that about you."

"So you'll go?"

She hesitates.

"It's not like I'm going to take part in it. Just about every student in the academy will be doing it. You have nothing to worry about. I'll be fine."

"It's the 'just about every student' part that has me worried. What if Roald comes back around?"

I scowl. "Was he bragging?"

"No, it was just a hunch that you conveniently confirmed." Her eyes flash, and for a moment, she looks perfectly demonic, and it makes me like her even more.

I like her in part because of who she is, all parts of her, both her werewolf and demon sides. She's strong and capable, stubborn and ambitious, a fighter, a hunter, a go-getter. How she's the target of bullying, I'll never understand, but I think bullying has a lot more to do with the culprit instead of the victim.

"He'll take part," I say even though I have no way to know if that's true or not.

"I just…"

“You wish things were different. I do too, but…” I grab her hand. “Bellanore, I know this is going to sound sappy and probably stupid, but I’m glad I met you, and the only way that would’ve ever happened is if Dural killed my pack and for Zaun to send me to kill Ronath. Otherwise, I had no plans to attend here.”

“What were you doing instead?”

“Honestly?” I give a half-smirk. “I was debating enrolling at Paranormal Hunters Academy. I missed the deadline to register, so I would’ve started at seventeen instead of sixteen.”

“You started last year late, though.”

“I pulled some strings.”

“What strings?”

“Money talks.”

“Where did you get the money from?”

I lower my head. It’s not something I want to talk about, but she does love to ask questions. “If I answer, will you go?”

“That’s—”

“Plenty fair,” I growl.

Wordlessly, she nods.

“I sold my house and used most of the money to grease the wheel.”

“That’s terrible,” she says with a gasp.

“Yeah, well, Headmaster Virgil Thorn isn’t the best of leaders. I think an alpha should be in charge.”

“He has the presence of one.”

“Yeah, but despite his measures and his lockdowns, werewolves and vampires are still fighting. There’s no control here. He doesn’t know that students were making poison on campus. He’s clueless.”

“I suppose that’s true,” she admits.

“What’s that?” I ask, cupping a hand behind my ear. “Want to say that again?”

She laughs and gently nudges my shoulder. “If you’re trying to get me to say ‘you’re right’—”

“You just said it. Music to my ears.” I clasp my hands to my heart. “I can die a happy man.”

“You aren’t a man.”

“I’m a dying werewolf.”

Not what she wants to hear, I’m sure.

“A promise is a promise,” I tell her. “You’re not demonic enough to have your word mean nothing.”

She groans. “You know me too well. If they come back, Robb, I’ll be here. You won’t have to face them alone.”

“How?” I ask, curious. She’s so certain she’ll know.

“I can sense your emotions from afar.”

“That so?” I rub my chin. “And how do I feel now?”

She grimaces and huffs as she crosses her arms.

“Agitated that you’re still here. Yes, that’s right.” I wink. “Go.”

Bellanore hesitates but then kisses my forehead and leaves.

Now that she’s gone, I can stop trying to project a sense of getting better. I’m not recovering well at all, but I do doubt the others will come by. For now, I just need to sleep and hope to the moon that I’ll wake, that the grim reaper won’t come to take me away just yet.

I have more life to live yet.

I hope.

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Chapter 19

Robb

A faint sound stirs me. I ignore it and try to roll over, but my ribs object. Now, no matter what position I lay, I'm in terrible pain, and I grumble as I sit up.

The noise, whatever it is, it's growing louder and louder, some kind of commotion. Must be the grand Hunt. I can see the silver light of the moon shining at the mouth of the cave.

But the loudness only increases. There's no way I'm going to be able to sleep.

Grumbling, I shift to lie down on my stomach and drag myself along the cave floor to the mouth. From there, I'm able to get onto all fours and then to stand.

My nose itches, and I sneeze. When I inhale, I can smell something that makes my skin crawl.

Blood.

I'm not feeling nearly one hundred percent, so I don't even bother to try to see if I can find a trail of blood on the grass. My nose can lead the way.

It's not easy for me to walk. I'm woozy, and my balance is off, but as long as I go slow, I don't fall down, so there's that, but the more I walk, the stronger the smell, and the sicker I feel. From the smell? Because I'm overdoing it? I don't know.

But then, I finally reach Silver Ironwoods. I'm not sure where the guards are, but there aren't any around here.

The blood… it's not from here. It's not from near Blood Haven.

It takes me some time, but I pick up the invisible trail, the stench of blood again. This time, I find a spot on campus where there is a large cluster of werewolves. Everywhere I turn, there are wounded werewolves.

One werewolf is cradling an arm with her hand. It's broken or maybe dislocated. I don't even recognize her, but I make my way to her since she seems to be at least with it mentally. The others are too concerned about their injuries to be of much help.

“Are you all right?” I ask her, but before she can answer, I continue, “Do you know where Bellanore is? Did you see her?”

The werewolf glares at me, mumbles something, and walks away at a faster pace, much too fast for me to catch up to her.

I try to help a few others all in the name of trying to find Bellanore, but none of them have anything worthwhile to share about her. Even though it’s selfish and Bellanore might not approve, I abandon my pathetic efforts to help them. I mean, it’s not as if I can do much anyhow. Instead, I stagger along, my hands brushing against the trunks of the trees to balance me as I seek out Bellanore.

It doesn’t take long, only a handful of shouts, for my voice to start to fade. Great. Even my voice is dying.

Still, I continue on. Focusing on Bellanore makes it easier for me to drag one foot in front of the other. The trees serve as massive crutches, and they aid me too, but the tree roots? They’re evil, pure evil.

Sure enough, I take a tumble, and I somehow manage to hit the top of my head right into a tree trunk. I stagger back and promptly plop down hard onto the ground. Dazed, I sit there a moment.

“Are you drunk?” a familiar voice asks.

Not Bellanore. Someone else.

The light of the moon shines down on her tan skin and dark brown hair. Ellamaria.

“Have you seen Bellanore?” I ask, struggling to stand.

Ellamaria purses her lips. “What’s going on with you?” she asks suspiciously.

“I’m hurt.”

The truth. I just don’t mention when it happened.

Her eyes widen.

“I’m trying to find Bellanore,” I say, agitated that she isn’t talking. “Clearly, Bellanore’s not with you. Where is she?”

“I’m not sure,” Ellamaria admits. “I’m trying to find her too.”

I glance all around and fight back a wave of dizziness. “Shouldn’t the Grand Hunt be over by now? Why are there still so many werewolves out yet?”

“I… I don’t know what’s going on,” Ellamaria says. She rubs her arms. “If you’re hurt—”

“I’m going to find her,” I say as firmly as I can despite my voice starting to turn raspy.

“You’re as stubborn as she is,” she grumbles.

“What is she stubborn about with you?” I ask, curious.

“I’m not going to tell you.”

“Ah, so with me.”

“Vain, much?”

“Am I wrong?”

Ellamaria smirks. “Who knew a guy might be right every once in a while?”

“A long while,” I concede, and she laughs even though it sounds a little forced.

We’re both nervous about Bellanore. No, nervous isn’t the word for it. I’m terrified. Can’t she sense my emotions? Shouldn’t my feelings be enough to make her want to come to me? Or would she go to the cave? No, she should be able to sense where I am, right? I don’t know. I don’t know much of anything. Honestly, I feel like I’m falling apart.

It takes a long while, but we search through the entire forest, and there’s no trace of Bellanore anywhere.

“Now what?” I grumble.

“We try our campus.” Ellamaria tries to call Bellanore again. Throughout our search, she would pause to call, and it didn’t take me long to realize that she tied it with whenever I started to lag behind. Ellamaria might not like me, but she’s still a good person. No wonder she and Bellanore are so close. I really should try to get to know Ellamaria, to befriend her…

What’s the point?

It makes me feel like I can’t do anything, and I hate feeling worthless, helpless. This feeling of vulnerability makes me want to rip out my hair or to claw my own face.

I don’t, of course. The curse is making even small wounds scar. Case in point, on the tip of my right index finger, I have a scar from a paper cut. A paper cut scarred me!

Pathetic, I know.

Instead of Patrick, my middle name should be Pathetic. Robb Pathetic Aline.

We head back to campus. For the most part, by unspoken agreement, we avoid the castles and buildings. Moonstone Academy has a lot of grassy areas and fields for werewolves to be able to let their wolves free to roam safely without fear of being discovered or seen by humans.

It’s those areas that we search next, and all the way to the eastern edge of Moonstone Academy grounds is where we find Bellanore.

Although we actually see Wyatt, Jett, and Mindy Spark all around her first.

Her bullies.

Interestingly enough, Gayle isn’t there.

Not that I’m happy about three attacking Bellanore instead of four.

A low rumble comes from deep within my chest. Maybe the fight is just starting because Bellanore shifts only now to her wolf. The others all do too, and I try to unleash my wolf.

I can't.

My wolf won't come out.

Ellamaria grabs my wrist. We're a good distance away from the fight, but we can clearly see them.

"Stay here," she says, her teeth changing into fangs already, her fingers twisting into claws too. She releases me, and I glower at her.

"I'm not—"

"You're hurt," she argues. "Bellanore will get hurt trying to save and protect you."

Curse her. She makes a good point.

Ellamaria races to join the fight as her wolf, and I try once more to coax out my wolf.

To no avail.

I hurry over, having to crawl for the most part, but I do my best. Once I'm there, I fight as a human. I grab fur and yank. I even trip one of the wolves. The wolf goes to jump on me, but Bellanore jumps into his side. Or hers. I don't know. I can't recognize the Spark wolves and tell them apart.

As I scramble to get back onto my feet, my fingers press against the ground, and I find some rocks. I throw them at the Spark wolves, and soon enough, one of them turns and leaves. Mindy maybe? That wolf is definitely the smallest out of all of the wolves here.

I hate feeling so weak, and I somehow end up on the ground again. I throw as many rocks as I can, missing more times than not, but one does land right on a wolf's snout. The werewolf curls back his upper lip, and he stalks toward me, getting ready to pounce, but Bellanore swoops in and bites his shoulder. He lets out a shrill sound, and she backs away. Her teeth are covered in blood, and the wolf doesn't engage her. He gives a low howl, and the other Spark wolf joins his side, and the two of them rush away, although they glance back. It takes me too long to realize they're glaring at Ellamaria and at me. They aren't happy with our interfering.

Too bad.

I just wish I could've actually fought for my girlfriend's life. All I could do was throw rocks.

I'm pathetic all right. I'm worthless.

I might as well die at this point because this… this isn't living.

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Chapter 20

Bellanore

I transform out of my wolf and almost trip in my haste to help Robb to his feet.

"Did you get hurt?" I demand.

"Yes, he's hurt," Ellamaria says. She stands where her wolf had just been, a few feet away. She looks furious, and honestly, Robb does too.

"Why didn't you teleport away?" he demands.

"You should've," Ellamaria spits out. "You know that fighting them isn't going to make things any better."

"I'm sick of the bullying," I say with a huff. "It's them who have the problem with me, and what they said… It's one thing to insult me. I can understand being afraid of demons and all of that, but…"

"What did they say?" Robb asks.

He's pale, so very pale. My heart aches. I want to think of him as my boyfriend, but I know he won't want me to. He's dying, yes, I know that, and I want to fight. I want to fight for his life. Robb's lost hope, and I understand that, but I'm not ready to let him go. Not yet.

Honestly, I just want to fight. Maybe it's the demon in me, but I can't stand by and ignore their insults. I don't want to have to rise up and be the better person.

So, yes, I fought them. I even provoked the fight to some extent. All I had to do was to teleport away, like they said, or else I could've walked away before they encircled me.

Instead, I punched Mindy right in the mouth hard enough that she might've lost a tooth, or at least it's loose.

I can't help smirking at that.

"What did they say that made you abandon all sense of honor?" Ellamaria asks, drawing me from my thoughts.

I snort. "What honor do they have? None."

"They said something about your mom, didn't they?" Robb asks softly.

I flinch.

"That's a yes." Ellamaria sighs. "I'm sorry."

“I want the bullying to end,” I say in a rush. “If I just flee all the time, it’ll only get worse, and frankly, I wanted to fight them. I didn’t want to hunt a white hart or anything else.”

“You wanted to fight them all along, didn’t you?” Ellamaria accuses.

I say nothing.

“No,” Robb says slowly. “You were trying to find Roald, weren’t you?”

“Roald?” Ellamaria asks. “What does he have to do with anything? Unless…” She glances at Robb.

He nods.

“So you both like to get into fights. You guys are so not good for each other.” Ellamaria’s laugh is completely exasperated. “I just can’t with you two. Seriously? Let’s just make enemies of as many wolves as possible. Why not? Better than the werewolves fighting vampires, right? Might as well. Fighting is all the rage. Why not get in on it?”

“What happened with the wounded werewolves?” Robb asks Ellamaria. “Do werewolves have broken limbs and become maimed as a result of the grand Hunt?”

“Of course not!” I blurt out. “Were werewolves attacked?”

Ellamaria stiffens. “I only heard a few whispers, but… it seems that vampires came onto our campus. They attacked some of the scouting parties for the Grand Hunt.”

“Are you serious?” I gape at her.

“Yes.”

“So much for that stupid lockdown,” Robb grumbles.

“You wanted one,” I point out.

“Yeah, to keep out…”

I furrow my brow and then realize he must mean Zaun. My swallow lands hard in my stomach.

“Don’t be naïve,” I tell him, trying to keep my tone light, but I’m too amped up from the fight.

“I prefer optimistic.”

“I’m missing something,” Ellamaria complains.

“Who was hurt?” I ask, changing the subject.

“I’m not sure,” she replies.

“I spied a lot of hurt werewolves, though,” Robb says.

“And you didn’t help them? Either of you?” I ask, exasperated.

“We were looking for you,” Ellamaria says in a huff.

“Clearly, we made the right call, didn’t we?” Robb asks her.

“No fair,” I complain. “You two can’t gang up on me.”

“You couldn’t find Roald,” Robb says slowly, “so you provoked the fight. Is that what happened?”

“What matters is if you two are hurt,” I say smoothly. “Are either

of you—"

"We're fine," Ellamaria says.

"Robb?" I prod.

"I'm alive," he says dryly.

"I can't believe you left the… that you came to find me," I tell him.

Ellamaria throws up her hands. "How did you get hurt, Robb? When?"

Ah, she's catching on.

Robb huffs a sigh. "Can't a guy be hot and mysterious and all of that?"

"When he gets hurt all the time, it makes him seem a little, ah, weak," Ellamaria says.

"I'm a lot of things," he starts.

"Weak isn't one of them," I interject.

Robb stares at me with a look that clearly says *weak is one of them.*

"Not by choice," I mumble.

Ellamaria grimaces. "What ramifications will tonight hold?" she asks.

The million-dollar question, especially when I consider just how the bullies will handle it. Gayle hadn't been with them. She hasn't been for the most part lately. I think she's trying to distance herself from them. Where was she earlier tonight? Taking part in the Grand Hunt? Did she get hurt by a vampire? When Mindy tells Gayle what I did, what will Gayle think? Will she turn against me again? I had been a bit rash, maybe, but I'm sick of them. There's only so much I can take, and they pushed me over the edge.

That had been their intention. They disparaged me first then my dad. Then, they insulted Robb. I didn't rise to their bait, not until they turned their hateful spew of filth on my mom.

"Come what may, we'll survive together," Ellamaria says, linking her arm through mine.

I just give Robb a look. Without a word, he links my other arm, and he leans on me heavily as we head back toward the castles. I don't bother to tell Ellamaria that Robb isn't staying in one, and I hate that he's walking so much. He's laboring. He's putting on a brave face, but that doesn't change anything.

The other night, the fight set him back.

Tonight set him back even more.

I'm not sure how he knew that I needed help—although I'm not saying that I actually did need help—but my wanting to stand up for myself forced Robb to stand up too. He's not weak. He's so very strong. He's going to keep going until he physically can't anymore, and that's going to happen far too soon.

Zaun is the most terrible and wicked of demons to do this to Robb.

How can he honestly think that Robb would be able to kill any demon, let alone one as powerful and mighty as my dad?

Maybe Zaun really can see the future. Maybe he can read the stars.

Maybe it's only a matter of time until my dad's dead.

Either way, I'm going to lose someone important to me.

I might very well have to draw a line in the sand at some point.

Just not tonight.

~

Imagine my surprise—not—that we don't have classes the next day. Instead, at noon, we're to head to the Imperial Meadow. Not just the students of Moonstone Academy. Those from Blood Haven will be there too.

The choice of having this meeting or whatever you want to call it at the Imperial Meadow is an interesting one. For the longest time, witches and vampires were at odds with one another. Yes, vampires are said to be demons, and they do like to fight and antagonize a lot more than just werewolves.

The Imperial Meadow is where the vampires and witches stopped fighting. To honor that peace, vampires allowed the witches to use their blood in a spell. The flowers grown from that spell with the vampires' blood and witches' magic are said to have a calming effect on all paranormal creatures.

I doubt that'll work on the vampires and werewolves, though. What are the headmasters thinking?

What I feel isn't anything akin to hope. Not at all. If anything, I feel despair, but I'm not about to voice that to Robb as we make our way there. Even though I begged for us to stay in the cave, he refused. Then, I asked if we could teleport. He refused that too. It's a good thing I'm not a witch because I would be tempted to turn his nose into a pig's.

He's far too pigheaded.

"This isn't going to change anything," Robb murmurs as we reach the Imperial Meadows. We're behind a long line of werewolves, so we can barely even see the field.

"I know it's not, but the headmasters like to pretend they have some measure of control. Otherwise, parents will want to pull their students, and the schools will lose money."

Robb snorts. "And the tuition they've lost from students who have died?"

I cluck my tongue. "They aren't smart, remember?"

"Yes, well, they have a lot of blood on their hands."

"Yes…" I stare at my own hands and try not to think about the

hellhound I killed.

"It's one thing to try to keep vampires and werewolves separated," Robb continues, either not noticing my distress or else trying to preoccupy me. "But that's not going to change the hatred in the hearts and minds of far too many werewolves and vampires."

"Why can't Wyatt and them just divert all of their hatred from me to the vampires?" I grumble.

"Is that fair?" Robb asks.

"Is it fair that they hate me because of who my father is?" I counter.

"Do you think this is part of it?" he asks quietly.

"Part of…"

"Zaun's plan. He wants your dad dead, yes, but maybe he wants war between the two species. Maybe your dad, whatever he's up to, will disrupt that."

I grimace. "I don't really sense a demonic touch to werewolves and vampires trying to kill each other," I protest.

"But it's possible."

"In theory," I admit begrudgingly.

He wrinkles his nose. "You just don't want to admit that I might be right."

"You could be. You could also be wrong."

Robb sighs and shifts toward me. I think he might want to rest his head on my shoulder, but then he shifts away. "I can't see."

We move closer. I've never been here before, and neither has Robb. It's beautiful, breathtaking, really. Flowers of every kind grow throughout the tall grass. I doubt humans even know about all of the flowers that grow here. Each kind has a different scent, and it's so wonderful to inhale them all. Despite myself, I feel myself calming down.

With a smile, I glance over at Robb to see if the place is affecting him any, but he seems to be as anxious and uneasy as he always is. A grimace makes any bit of calmness flee me as quickly as it came.

The werewolves are all on one side of Imperial Meadows, the vampires across from us. I try to see Romelia, my cousin, but I can't spot her anywhere. Hopefully, she's fine.

Does it bother me that she hasn't reached out to me at all, that she hasn't checked to see if I'm all right despite the animosity between the two species? No, honestly, it doesn't. For all I know, none of the receptionists I talked to ever mentioned anything to her about people calling to see how she is, and even if they hadn't, there's no guarantee I gave my name or that they would give it to her. She could very well not know that I have. Besides, she has her own life, and I hope that she isn't mixed up in all of this.

Headmaster Virgil Thorn stalks to the no man's land. He has a graceful gait, and he does radiate a bit of power, but not enough. Robb's right. He can't get it done.

The other headmaster, Ambrose Mandrake, stalks toward the werewolf. The headmaster of Blood Haven looks very much like a predator. Both have black hair, but the vampire has dark red eyes compared to Headmaster Virgil's amber ones.

The two murmur for a moment. I can't make out the words, and I don't know if anyone here can hear them. After a moment, the headmasters turn their backs to each other to face their students. It's a daring move, one that screams that they trust one another, but I'm certain they hate each other as much as most of the students do.

"The fighting must stop," Headmaster Ambrose dictates.

"The vampire is right," Headmaster Virgil states.

All around us, werewolves howl and boo. I happen to notice Julian Moonblaze, a werewolf Ellamaria tried to say had a crush on me last year. He doesn't complain with the other wolves. If anything, he seems displeased with them but also preoccupied.

"The only way to ensure the safety of our students is if this feud is laid to rest," Headmaster Ambrose adds.

"Your safety is paramount," Headmaster Virgil continues.

"Our safety? What about safety from their fangs?" a werewolf calls out.

"What about their wolves? They're nothing but filthy animals," a vampire shoots back.

"Vampires and werewolves—" Headmaster Virgil starts.

"Have been killing each other since they first came to be. It's in our blood."

I swallow hard. I've heard that voice before. It belongs to one of the professors here at Moonstone, a professor I haven't had personally.

If even the professors want the war, how can the headmasters stop it?

Do the headmasters even want it to end? Is all of this just a farce?

Ellamaria pushes her way to my side. "There's a lot of werewolves not here," she murmurs.

I furrow my brow.

"The ones injured?" Robb asks.

She eyes him for a moment. "The ones injured last night are in the infirmary yet," she says, lifting her eyebrows.

She still wants to know about Robb and his injury, but that's on Robb to tell her or not.

"Not only that," she continues once it's clear Robb's not going to say anything, "but I found out that a few werewolves sneaked off campus to have a party. They didn't want to have anything to do with

the Grand Hunt. Weren't bothering anyone. The vampires hit them too."

"The werewolves were on neutral ground," I say slowly.

Ellamaria nods. "They weren't near Blood Haven."

I scowl at the vampire side. This is going on far enough, but I have so many other issues to deal with too.

Why does it feel like my life is spiraling out of control? And if that's how I feel, I can't imagine what Robb's going through.

I reach over and grab his hand, our fingers interlocking. The future isn't set yet, even if Zaun might think it is. There has to be a way for there to be peace, for no one else to die.

Yeah, and maybe a vampire and a werewolf will fall in love.

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Chapter 21

Robb

The guards around the campus perimeter? Werewolves but also grim reapers. Witches have also been called upon to set up magical barriers. I'm not sure if Bellanore can still teleport out.

I don't appreciate the addition of the grim reapers at all. One of them likes to watch me everywhere I go. As if I don't already know that I'm marked for death. I hate them more than anything.

No. I hate Zaun more than I hate anyone else.

No. Dural's the one I hate most of all.

Actually, maybe Collin's the one I hate above all else.

What does it matter? Two of the three are dead anyhow, one by my hand.

Honestly, I'm afraid to take more Mystic Twilight. Will it help with my injuries? Who can say? Will it cause me to become stronger? The chances of it causing my heart to give out is too high.

Which means outside of my going to that meeting of werewolves and vampires, I stick to my cave. The only way I'm able to get to Professor Hyde's class is because Bellanore takes it upon herself to teleport me to his office and then go to her class. She'll then swing by to walk me out of the castle and then teleport me back to the cave once we're outside. I don't know if she's hiding her teleportation from the professors or if she just wants to hide the reason behind the teleportation.

Honestly, it's getting harder and harder for me to keep on going, so maybe I should just drink the Mystic Twilight and be done with it. At least the measures in place seem to make for a semblance of peace, but that's mostly because we physically can't leave the campus. What's going to happen when the school year is over? If some of the professors are pro-war, it's possible that some of the alphas are too. Who knows? Maybe the three weeks between year two and year three will be when it all shakes down.

The only good thing about Bellanore teleporting me back and forth is that I see her every day. We eat almost every dinner together.

Sometimes, she'll spend the night in the cave with me. I usually sleep through when she has to wake for her first class, so we don't eat breakfast together. Actually, I don't eat breakfast at all.

"Do you want me to bring you lunch for when you watch over Otso?" Bellanore asks me one day after she teleports us back to the cave after I just spent the duration of a class with the cub that no longer looks like a cub.

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, Otso will just steal it from me."

She giggles. "I'll bet. You want me to grab you something now?"

"No, I'm good."

"Robb, you need to eat to keep up your strength," she admonishes.

"But I'm not hungry," I protest.

"When did you last eat?"

"Dinner."

"Last night?"

I wince. "Yeah."

"Have you been eating one meal a day?"

"Usually."

She mutters to herself, and she's gone and back in a flash. To my horror, she lifts the spoon from the stew as if she means to feed me.

"I'm not a baby," I grumble.

"No? Babies need to be told when to eat. They have to be spoon-fed. If you don't want me to feed you, then feed yourself."

"No one likes being told what to do," I inform her.

She ignores me as she quietly appraises me for a long moment. "You don't have much of an appetite, do you?"

"No."

"You should eat anyhow."

"Don't you think my body—"

"Your body is trying to heal from a curse that can't be broken, so no, I don't think your body accurately knows what's going on."

"Bellanore…"

"Yes?"

I hang my head. I want to ask her what's the point. What's the point of eating? What's the point of any of this?

But I don't. I don't want to think about what comes after this.

Even so, my lips betray me. "Have you seen your dad lately?"

"No. Not since I asked him for money." She grimaces and brushes her hair back from her shoulder. "It's not like him. Normally, he tries to train me every weekend, whenever we don't have class."

"He's giving you the silent treatment. Maybe that's a good thing."

"That's not my dad. He's not cool and calm and clear-headed

enough for the silent treatment. He's more likely to rant and rave, be all fire, not ice."

"Let me guess. He holds grudges."

"Not for as long as you would think, actually. Once he forgives you, it's as if it never happened in the first place, but until then…" She shakes her head.

"You hurt him by asking about hiring a necromancer?"

"That's something he can't do," she explains. "Not all demons are created equal."

"Are all necromancers demons?" I ask.

"Yes."

"That doesn't surprise me."

"It does me."

I lift my eyebrows, shocked. "Who else do you think should have that ability?"

"Angels."

"Angels," I repeat. "Seriously?"

"Angels are supposedly all about love, right? Wouldn't it make sense that they can't let go of loved ones that have died?"

"Yes, I say slowly, "but if their loved ones are good people, they would have gone to Heaven, right?"

"In theory."

"In theory?"

"Well, some people do make deals with demons, and then there's also the layers."

"Layers?"

"I think I read somewhere that Heaven has layers." She shrugs. "I don't know. I'm not an expert on Heaven. Never been there."

I want to ask if she thinks she can go there after she dies, but I don't like thinking about her dead, so I instead start to eat the stew. It's a bit cool, and the meat is tough, but the vegetables are perfect, not too soft but not hard either.

"Happy?" I ask when I show her the finished bowl.

"For now. You'll need to eat more tonight and then in the morning."

"My stomach might reject all of that food."

She heaves a sigh. "You're going to have to build up your strength."

"For what?"

"I don't want you to die or Dad, so we're just going to have to keep you alive until we can figure something out." She nods a few times as if that settles that.

"There's nothing to figure out."

"I should get going. I have to write a paper." She rubs her eyes. "I

hate papers. Why can't we just show that we know this or that? Demonstrate our abilities? Practical application is so much better, don't you think?"

"Hey, don't look at me. I ask for the papers and the projects."

"Weirdo," she says affectionately.

She hesitates, and then, like always, she kisses my cheek and then teleports away. I keep telling myself that one of these times, I'm going to grab her and kiss her, but I never do, and one of these times will be my last chance, and I'll miss out.

Because I'm nothing more than a coward.

No, no, I'm trying to put space between us so that when I die, she won't be as devastated.

I'm a coward *and* a liar because I can see it in her eyes.

She loves me.

Can she see it in my eyes that I care for her as much as I can?

"I thought she would never leave."

I hear Zaun's voice long before I can see the demon. He appears on a boulder in the corner of the cave, sitting on it as if it's a high-backed chair.

The demon stands and slowly stretches his legs. "Getting close to her to make a move on Ronath?"

"Look, Zaun, if you want it done, then you better find me something stronger than Mystic Twilight, something that won't kill me, or else I'm going to die before I even have a chance to attack Ronath."

"Bah, you should have killed him well before now. You're lucky the curse hasn't ended you already." The demon shakes a finger at me. His eyes are an unsettling shade of purple. I hadn't taken much stock of the demon's appearance before, too frazzled by his presence, I guess.

"You should just kill me and be done with it," I mumble.

"Is that what you want?" The demon lifts his eyebrows. "Don't you want to see your family again? Your brother? I do believe you two were rather close, weren't you? You certainly screamed at that drow as if he had killed you when he killed your brother."

I close my fingers into a tight fist. Maybe I'll take out a demon after all, only Zaun instead of Ronath.

"There's no reason to have your anger pointed toward me," Zaun says easily. "After all, I came here to warn you."

"Warn me about what?" I ask, not trusting the snake one second.

"Ronath is gaining a lot of wealth. He's devoted to greed, but that's not all. Every day, he's growing even more powerful, and if you don't make a move on him soon…" Zaun holds out his hands as if he's innocent. "Then I'll have no choice but to do it myself, and then you

will die.”

I swallow hard.

The demon necromancer gives me the creepiest smile. “I promise to make your death that much more painful for him than even what you’ve been suffering as a result of being a cursed lone wolf.”

With that, Zaun teleports away, and I’m left with a tremendous heaviness in my chest.

Oh, yes, I can feel emotions all right.

Even though I like to pretend that I’ve come to terms with my impending death, that’s not actually the case.

I’m terrified.

And I really don’t want to die.

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Chapter 22

Robb

There's no way for me to win, though. If I go up against Ronath, he'll kill me. If I don't, either Zaun will just off me himself, or else the curse will finally catch up to me.

By the moons, even Roald himself might be the one to kill me at this rate.

Somehow, the school year is winding down, and I've basically finished everything that I can for the classes. Each of the professors is pleased with my work, although Sterling hasn't been coming around Professor Hyde's office at all lately, not even when I'm not around. Professor Hyde tries to hide it, but I can tell he's worried. He asked me if anything happened, if Sterling said anything to me, but none of the birds ever have. Not even any of the birds out in the wild.

There's a rat that sometimes comes to the cave. He'll talk to me some, but he's crude and rude, and half the time, he doesn't even make any sense. It's not that I can't understand him. I can figure out what he's saying, but the words are just gibberish. Professor Hyde repeatedly said that not all animals think like humans do, so their speech patterns will be different, their thought patterns different, but this is just preposterous.

The rat is heading my way now, but I ignore him and grab my tablet. Not to do school work. To continue the only thing I've been doing—trying to get a hold of some of Ronath's business partners. Bellanore has no idea that I'm trying to do this, and honestly, it's probably another reason why I haven't kissed her.

I feel guilt over so many things, including this.

I mean, it's ridiculous for me to think that I'll even have a chance of besting Ronath. He'll kill me easily.

Unless I can learn of any weaknesses that Ronath has. That combined with the element of surprise…

But can I really do it? Can I go through with killing someone when their back is turned?

It would mean losing Bellanore too. I would gain my family but

lose the love of my life.

Yes, I realize I'm seventeen, but werewolves are devoted, loyal animals. When we love someone, we love them with everything we have in us. My feelings for Bellanore will only grow.

That's why I'm so selfish because I know I'm going to hurt her and badly.

The few business partners of Ronath that I uncovered so far have all turned up either dead or dead ends in that I can't find out where they are or what they're up to, so they might as well be dead. I am able to find a guy from the fifteenth century, but he's dead. A woman in the seventeenth century was buried alive. Interesting. I almost wonder if Ronath did that himself.

How about instead of finding his associates, I just look into Ronath's business itself? But all of the articles and mentions are so vague that his business could be related to oil or technology or smuggling or anything at all. There are no specifics anywhere.

Something rubs against my boot. I glance down to see a black furball.

A cat. A black cat.

"Lucky me," I mutter.

The cat narrows her yellow eyes. "Meow, meow, meow. You should consider yourself lucky."

"Why's that?"

She meows, "Only idiots think black cats are unlucky."

"That so?"

"Meow, meow. We like to be familiars of witches, right? So, we tend to be witch's spies. If we see something the witch doesn't like…"

"You're saying the bad luck is actually the witch's doing?"

I swear the cat grins as she meows, "So it *is* possible to teach an old dog new tricks!"

"I'm not old," I grumble.

"Meow, meow, meow. I like you. You don't bother to be offended that I called you a dog."

"I am a werewolf."

"Some of your kind get particular. 'We're not dogs. We're wolves.' No difference."

I burst out laughing. The way she meowed the part when she mimicked a werewolf is hilarious. She almost howled the meows!

"I like you too," I tell her.

"Don't get used to me being 'round. I'm not happy."

"Why not?"

"My witch died."

"I'm sorry."

She swats me. The cat's upset. I guess even they hate pity.

I almost say, “Sorry” again, but I stop myself in time.

“Why are you hanging around me then?” I ask instead.

She eyes me.

“You sense the curse,” I grumble.

“Magic’s magic.” I swear she shrugs.

“Not quite.” I exhale and then eye her. “Your witch didn’t happen to leave behind a lot of potions, did she?”

“Nope,” she meows almost gleefully.

“A witch with no abilities to make potions.” I shake my head. “You sure she was a witch?”

“Stop it! You know there are nine types of magic a witch can do, and not all of them can do all of them.”

“There are ten,” I correct the cat.

“You expect me to count?” The cat sniffs.

I eye her. “Did you do something to the rat?”

“Maybe. Why? Don’t tell me you prefer to talk to that doofus over me.”

“Doofus?”

“Flea-riddled, mangy ball of filth. That better?”

“Seems more cat-like of an insult.”

“Yeah, well, when you spend as much time as I do around a witch, you tend to talk a bit more human.”

“That so?”

“Yeah. You got a problem with a smart cat, dog?”

“No, but I would rather you not call me dog. Want me to call you Cat?”

The cat makes a sound that’s almost like a snort. “I *am* a cat.”

“Do you have a name?”

“Is milk delicious?”

“Why do cats like milk so much anyhow?”

The cat wrinkles her nose. “We’re actually lactose intolerant. Did you know that?”

“What? Why drink milk then?”

“It’s so delicious!” She purrs. “But, yeah, it upsets our stomachs. I mean, we breastfeed, just like you do, but after that, we shouldn’t have any more milk.”

“Seriously? Just because it’s delicious?”

“We can smell the fat and protein in the milk. It calls to us.”

“There are plenty of other fatty foods packed with protein.”

“Yeah, but are they all that delicious and creamy?”

“Cats are messed up.”

The cat snorts again. “What’s messed up is your curse.”

“What can you sense about it?” I ask curiously.

“It’s strong. Very powerful.”

“That it?” I ask, disappointed.

“I’m a cat, not a witch. What do you want from me?”

“Company.”

The cat stretches and then shrugs. “I guess. Why not? I don’t have my witch to go back home to. I miss her.”

“I miss Rickard.”

“Who’s he?”

“My brother.”

“Why don’t you call him?”

“He’s dead.”

The cat eyes me and then jumps onto my lap, knocking the tablet to the side.

I think about telling her that the tablet is expensive, to be careful with it, but I find myself rubbing her back instead. I never would’ve thought I would befriend a cat, but then, my life is nothing more than a series of surprises.

And a series of tragedies.

A series of events that are most disastrous.

“Do you want to know my name?” I ask the cat.

She meows, “If you want to tell me, I can’t stop you.”

“Let me guess,” I say dryly. “Even if I tell you, there’s no guarantee that you’ll call me it.”

“You really are a quick study!”

I laugh. “I’m glad you’re here. I needed something or someone to take my mind off things for a bit.”

“Always put off until tomorrow. That’s my advice.”

“Eventually, tomorrow won’t come.”

“Yeah, but you’re dead, so you won’t care about it anymore.”

“There is such a thing as regret.”

“I don’t understand that.”

“Regret? Yeah, I guess you don’t, considering you drink milk even though it hurts you.”

“I know for a fact that there are lactose intolerant people who will eat ice cream or other stuff that they shouldn’t and even say it was worth it so… Yeah. I do what I want.”

“Every cat’s motto, right?”

“You know too much. You better stay on my good side.”

“Threatened by a cat. Today just keeps getting better and better.”

She peers up at me. “Sarcasm is something I still struggle with. Are you being sarcastic?”

“Maybe.”

“A cat’s adopted you as a pet at least for now. It is a great day for you.”

I laugh again, and we just sit there, my rubbing the cat and her

purring in response. At least she's content, but I can't help glancing over at the tablet from time to time.

The cat notices and lifts her head. "What do you want with it?"

"It has all kinds of information—"

"I'm not a stupid cat, remember? Although there aren't any stupid cats… You have no excuse."

"Sorry," I mumble. "I didn't realize animals can be so perceptive."

"Not all animals. Remember that rat? The cat licks her lips.

Um, do cats eat rats? I don't want to know.

"So, what do you want to know?"

"Nothing you'll be able to help with."

"Try me. I'm not your typical cat, remember?"

"I'm cursed by a drow, so I'm to kill a demon. If I do that, my pack will come back around."

"A demon wants you to kill his competitor, huh?"

I blink a few times.

"Your brother's dead. I figure you mean your pack will come back from the dead. Am I right? And if that's the case, you're dealing with a necromancer."

"You might just be the smartest cat alive."

"Thank you. Wait. That wasn't sarcasm, was it?" She lifts her paw as if to swat at me.

"No sarcasm! I meant it!"

"Good. So why do you need the device for?"

"I'm trying to learn the demon's weakness."

"Nah. You need to take a page out of my witch's spellbook."

I'm more than a little skeptical about this concerning the witch is dead. "Go ahead," I say suspiciously.

"All you have to do is find a way to get the necromancer to bring back your pack before you have to kill that demon."

"How would I… Blackmail."

"Bingo! You really can be taught!"

The cat jumps down before I can ask her to, and I grab the tablet. She hops onto my shoulder to watch as I do some digging.

But that's a big fat failure. There's even less available about Zaun than there is Ronath.

I'm screwed.

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Chapter 23

Bellanore

"I know that expression," Ellamaria says as she sweeps into my room without bothering to knock.

"What expression?" I'm surprised she even caught a glimpse of my face considering I'm pacing. I tend to do that a lot when I'm thinking.

Actually, I would prefer to go for a walk outside when I want to think things through, but I don't want to run into certain werewolves.

The bullies.

My bullies.

As much as I try to ignore them, their words, their whispers, their insults, their stares, I can't get them out of my mind. I'll be trying to master a technique for class, and something they said would come to mind, and it sets me on edge all over again. All I want to do is lash out against them, but I know that won't help any. Still, there has to be something I can do.

"You're trying to puzzle through something," Ellamaria says. "Why not tell me what it is?"

I shake my head. "No. I can handle this."

She lifts her eyebrows. "Does it involve Robb?"

I stop my pacing and face her. "No."

Ellamaria crosses her arms and just waits.

Defeated, I hang my head. "I want to stand up to the bullies. I don't think I can handle the tormenting anymore."

"So go to the headmaster."

"That will make things worse."

"Maybe, maybe not. There hasn't been another fight between werewolves and vampires. Maybe he'll be able to get them to stop."

"I already contacted the alpha of Forge before. It wasn't about Nia and the bullying, but he wasn't able to stop her. She did the whole poison thing *after* I ratted her out about the Mystic Twilight! What makes me think that their alphas or the headmaster or any of the professors would be able to control them?"

Ellamaria crosses over and gives me a hug. "I know it's hard, but

there's someone else you could talk to."

"Who?"

She draws back, her hands on my shoulders. "Your dad."

"No way. He'll threaten them, and if they try to get lippy with him, he might just go ahead and kill them."

"Well, at least they would be out of your hair then."

"Ellamaria!"

"I'm just joking." She bites her lower lip and goes around me to sit in my desk chair. "I know they haven't made things easier on you."

"You don't have to worry."

"I wish we had more classes together," she wails. "They never bother you in zoolingualism."

"It's not your fault," I assure her, but she's right. When she's around, the bullies leave me be for the most part. It's not as if I don't have any other friends besides Ellamaria. It's just that right now, tensions are running high. Students are upset that they can't leave the campus, and the ones who fought against the vampires are on edge. The ones who were injured by the vampires and their packmates and friends all want revenge.

The entire campus is filled with werewolves who long to fight, to strike back.

But I don't. As much as I want the bullying to stop, I don't want to resort to just fighting to do so.

"You haven't come up with a plan, have you?" Ellamaria asks.

"Not yet." I sit on the edge of my bed, my elbows on my knees. Hunching over, I cradle my chin in my hands. "Get my mind off this."

"Fine. Let's see… I've spent some time in the infirmary."

"You have? You weren't hurt at all, were you?"

"No, no. Nothing like that."

"Then why?"

She shrugs. "I thought that maybe I could see if I could help some of the hurt werewolves. I wanted to maybe get them to see that they got hurt because they didn't run away. Yes, the vampires attacked us, but the hatred is only going to grow and get worse if we keep killing each other."

"I'm sure that went over well."

"Oh, it was a disaster!" Ellamaria laughs. "The first few times I went, I didn't say anything. I just helped the healers with whatever they needed. They sometimes use gemstones to help them, especially with drawing out poisons, did you know that?"

"No," I murmur.

"But as I continued to go back and saw the same werewolves there, listening to them go on and on about the vampires… I just had to say something. The werewolves got so worked up, though, that the healers

said I can't come back anymore."

I sit up taller. "I'm glad you tried to help them to see where they were wrong."

"What did I expect? The vampires ambushed us. Now, if I tried to talk to them after one of the times the werewolves ambushed the vampires, maybe then I could've gotten through to them, but werewolves are not only loyal. They're also stubborn."

"Some more than others."

"They're too set in their ways, which is crazy. I mean, we've come so far as a species! We used to eat flesh and drink blood! We could only transform under the light of the full moon! Now, we can transform whenever we want. We can just transform our fingers into claws. No flesh, no blood… We're so much stronger than ever before, but we're going to resort to violence? To mindless hate? Why?" She throws up her hands.

"I know. It's a terrible world we live in. I just wish…" I hang my head. "So many things."

"I've been talking to someone," Ellamaria says abruptly.

"Who?"

"A… A werewolf."

I snort. "That really narrows it down. A guy?"

She nods. "I… I think I might be getting somewhere with him."

"Who?"

"Don't freak out, okay? But I think that you're more than just who you associate with."

I narrow my eyes. "You aren't talking about Jett, are you? Definitely not Wyatt. Tell me it's not Wyatt."

"Of course not! Neither of them!"

"Then who?" I cry.

I really don't like that she won't look at me. She's staring at the floor, and she's wringing her hands.

"Who have you been talking to?" I ask.

"Decker," she mumbles.

"Decker Winds?" I repeat, dumbfounded.

She nods. "He's actually really smart and—"

"You can judge some people by the ones they hang out with," I spit out. "Seriously? Decker is involved with Roald. Roald's the one who carved up Robb's chest as if it was butter!"

"Robb healed," Ellamaria protests.

"Are you serious right now?"

"No! I didn't mean it the way it came out." Ellamaria looks ready to cry. "I'm sorry. I just… I knew you would react like this, and I knew you wouldn't hear me out. Will you just… Will you listen, please?"

"I'll listen," I spit out.

“Decker and I have been talking for a little while now. We’re just talking. He’s worried.”

“About?”

“Nia. And Roald. And Elliot. He knows they all go too far, especially Nia and Roald, but—”

“But nothing.”

“Bellanore,” Ellamaria warns. “You promised you would listen.”

“So I can’t say anything?”

“No, and don’t think anything either.”

“What?” I can’t help but laugh at the absurdity.

“I can read your thoughts. Your face. You can’t hide your emotions. Just stop judging, okay?”

“Fine. Go ahead. I’ll keep my mouth shut and try not to think.”

“Good. Thank you.” Ellamaria sucks in a deep breath. She looks so nervous, and her hands are shaking. “We’re friends. That’s all. He knows that we can’t be anything more so long as he’s associated with them, but he also thinks that he can’t leave.”

I want to say something, but I remember just in time that I can’t.

“When Robb got hurt… Decker told me about it. How he didn’t fight, how Elliot had Robb pinned… Full nelson? Nelson hold? Something like that. Anyhow, that’s when Roald sliced and carved into Robb, but what you and Robb don’t know is that Decker almost got sliced himself. Afterward, Roald screamed and lost it on Decker because Elliot pointed out that Decker didn’t lay a claw on Robb.”

“Why won’t he just leave then?” I ask.

“Didn’t you hear me? Roald went crazy. He hates Robb so much that he almost turned against Decker. He almost attacked Decker. Can you imagine what Roald will do if Decker does leave that group? He’ll go after Decker just like he does Robb, and Decker would be the one to face his wrath.”

“Staying… I guess it’s an impossible situation.”

“It is!” Ellamaria breathes easier, and she lowers her hands from her lap, her arms dangling by her sides. “Decker used to be with Roald and them because he had no other friends. Who wants to be without any friends? He never felt like he belonged with his pack, and that has to be almost as bad as not having one at all.”

I glance away. “I think not having one is far worse than one you don’t want,” I can’t help snapping, reflecting on both my situation’s and Robb’s.

Ellamaria scratches the back of her neck. “I get that. I’m sorry. I just don’t know what to do, how to help him. Decker’s afraid of both Roald and Nia. We know what she’s capable of, what he’s capable of. They’re both bad news, and they both need to be stopped. There’s no doubting that.”

“How long have you been talking to Decker?”

Ellamaria shrugs. “A while now.”

“A few days? Weeks?”

She says nothing.

“Months?” I blurt out. “You’ve been talking to him for months, and you’re just telling me now?”

“I know that you’ve been dealing with stuff. Your mom, your dad… Robb… the bullies…”

“You can talk to me about anything,” I say dully. “Have I been a bad friend?”

“No! I’m sorry I didn’t tell you earlier.”

“You didn’t because you were afraid I would react the way that I did. I *am* a bad friend.”

“You’re under a lot of stress. You push yourself too hard, and you want everyone to like you.”

“I don’t want to be popular.”

“No. I guess everyone isn’t the right word. You want your parents to love you and for no one to hate you. That better?”

“Who doesn’t want that?”

“It’s a lot easier to have your parents love you if one isn’t a demon.”

“I used to think…”

“I know. To think that over a year and a half ago, I was teasing you about your dad being your favorite parent.”

“Ellamaria…”

“Yeah?”

I want to share with her about the hellhound. I told her some of what my dad pulled but not all of it.

My mouth opens, but nothing comes out. Finally, I mumble, “I need a plan.”

“To take down the bullies?”

“Yes.”

“Why don’t you talk to Robb?”

I shake my head. No way.

I don’t want to risk Robb’s life for my issue, considering Robb has his own to handle. He never should’ve gotten involved with the rough crowd to begin with, even though it seems like they enfolded him into the group without his even wanting it. If he hadn’t come here, he wouldn’t have to worry about the likes of them.

If he hadn’t come here, that would mean his pack would still be alive. All would be right in his world.

I should want that for him, but I’m just like Robb.

I’m selfish.

I want him in my life.

Exhaling, I lift my head and smile at Ellamaria. “So… you said that Decker knows you two can’t be together as long as he’s in the rough crowd. Does that mean that when he finally ditches them, you two will start dating?”

Ellamaria’s tanned complexion can’t hide her blush, and I start to tease her, begging for more details. It feels so right to talk and pretend for a moment that I’m a normal teenage werewolf.

But I’m not normal.

I’m not just a werewolf.

I have a demon for a father and a boyfriend who is cursed.

My life isn’t shaping up how I thought it would, but I can figure this mess out. I can right wrongs.

I have to.

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Chapter 24

Robb

The cat bristles without warning.

"What's wrong?"

She doesn't even give me a backward glance, and she races out of the cave.

Wow. Geez. Right when I was starting to really like that cat too. Guess I did something to set her off.

I brush my hands together to try to get some of her fur off, but it clings to me like cellophane.

Grumbling, I stand and run my hands over the stone walls of the cave. Without warning, the cave is plunged into darkness. Someone's standing in the entrance, blocking the light.

My mouth goes dry as Roald steps inside first. Nia's a half-step behind him, sporting a cocky little half-smile. I almost expect to see painted nails or teeth, but so far, it seems that she only does that for vampires.

Right behind them is Elliot. Last of all is Decker. The brown-haired, brown-eyed werewolf stares straight at me, and I get the feeling Decker is trying to tell me something, but I haven't the foggiest notion what it might be.

Roald halts when he's directly across from me. Nia is on his right, the other two on his left. The so-called leader sweeps out his arm toward me. "Go ahead, Decker. Do what you didn't last time."

Ah, so that's what this is. A test of loyalty. Roald realized Decker didn't fight me that other time. Subconsciously, I touch my chest. The scars have formed, the skin as healed as it will get. I had to take some Mystic Twilight the other night in order to get some sleep, and I feel better, but I'm also not nearly as strong as I had been before the curse. I'm not even as strong as I had been when I consumed a ton of Mystic Twilight.

Nia's nostrils flare, and she holds up a hand before Decker can step forward. "What's that smell? I recognize it."

"Who cares?" Roald asks.

“I care. It’s Mystic Twilight.” She glowers at me. “You trying to prove something? You want to act tough? Think you can take the four of us on?”

“I don’t think much of anything,” I tell her.

“You think you’re so funny, don’t you?” Her nostrils flare again. “Your girlfriend shut down my mom’s operation, and now you set up shop? A witch wannabe, huh? That what you are? Your girlfriend is a hybrid. You wish you were too?”

“I am what I am.”

“And what does that mean?” Elliot asks, talking for the first time.

I grin. “It’s not that hard to figure out.”

“You’re a dead werewolf walking,” Roald growls. He rolls back his sleeves. “Decker, if you don’t draw blood first, I’m going to draw yours.”

Decker squeezes his eyes shut. It’s not that hard to see that he doesn’t want to do this at all, and I get it. I understand. The choices you made in the past affect your future, but not just your future. The future of all those you later come in contact with. By befriending and joining the rough crowd, Decker now has to either fully embrace what that crowd stands for or else that crowd will turn against him.

It’s nothing personal.

But it is.

If not Decker, then someone else would’ve stood here, another clone of Elliot, a Roald wannabe, someone who didn’t have a conscience like Decker.

It’s not that hard for me to wave Decker over. “Go ahead,” I tell him.

Decker crosses over with a fair amount of swag, but he hesitates.

I nod.

He bites his lip. He still doesn’t want to go at me even though I just said for him to.

Even though he’s been threatened, he still doesn’t want to hit me.

“You’re giving me the chance to hit you first?” I ask loudly, putting on a show. “You’re a better wolf than the rest of them.”

Roald bursts forward, and I sidestep Decker, but he chooses that moment to swing. His hook goes way out, wild, and he knocks me right across my face, his fist coming all the way around to hit my far ear. The guy must have Gumby as a relative or something, considering how much it seems like his arm stretched out.

Well, there you go, Roald. Decker decked me.

And it’s a doozy of a hit. I go down somewhat, but it’s mostly an excuse to ram forward and headbutt Roald. I knock him to the side, almost into Nia, and then I race out of the cave. The last thing I need is for me to be attacked there, ganged up on, on the floor, kicked and

punched to death. I can already see blood coating the cave floor when I close my eyes.

My legs, though, can't last long, and I have to stop running. I'm risking using up all of my energy already, and the fight's just begun.

I whirl around and fight through a wave of dizziness to stay upright and watch as the rough crowd tumbles out of the cave. Nia spots me first, and she heads my way. Roald points and then rushes over. It's almost comical how different they are. Nia is far calmer and more collected, but Roald is all emotion and violence.

I don't even bother to try to bring out my wolf. I'm dying. He's dying.

We'll both be dead soon.

Maybe even in a few minutes.

Roald reaches me first. No surprise. He's running, and he's the tallest with the longest legs of them all. I'm halfway up a hill, so I have the high ground, but I'm not up for a fight, especially not when it's against three. Against four? That blow Decker landed still has me reeling.

Roald cocks his arm back. I sidestep it and go to grab his wrist to stop him from hitting me, but he just bends his arm, forcing me to step forward so I'm leaning across his body, and his other arm comes up. I barely get my hand up to block it.

By that time, Elliot and Decker have arrived. Elliot yanks me away from Roald, and I duck. Elliot's swing is wild again, and he staggers off balance and then falls forward, rolling off my back.

When I straighten, Decker's in front of me, Elliot behind. Did Decker push Elliot? Or did Elliot's swing cause him to lose his footing?

I don't have time to worry about that because Nia's here. She doesn't have anything to say, but she shoots out her arm.

Everything in me says it's not right to fight a woman, but Nia isn't a typical woman, and I know she won't hesitate to kill me, so I grab her wrist, this time actually succeeding, and I kick her in the stomach.

She hardly reacts. Does she have abs of steel? Or am I that weak?

Decker gives me a look, and he kicks me in the stomach. There's almost no power behind his kick. It's for show, but I'm so weak that I stagger back a few steps.

Elliot's there. He grabs me around my waist from behind me, but he doesn't manage to pin my arms down, and I blindly kick behind me a few times until I make contact. His grip loosens, but then I realize I can see his foot, and I stomp on that twice. He releases me with a howl.

Before I can get away from him, Elliot's already recovered, and he plows me to the ground. The wind's knocked out of me, and I can

hardly breathe. Worse, my head connected with a rock, and my vision blurs. I kick and force myself onto all fours. Elliot's beside me somehow, and I step right on his stomach to try to move away from the quartet.

"This is pathetic," Nia grumbles. "Just finish him, and let's be done already."

"With pleasure." Roald cracks his knuckles and rolls his neck from side to side.

Without warning, someone jumps in front of me. I can't tell who it is at first, and I blink a few times, hoping my vision will clear. The werewolf has his back to me, so he doesn't want to fight me.

Who would want to take on Roald?

Wyatt Spark.

Sure enough, I inch to the side so I can see his profile. Yes, it's Wyatt. His face is a mask of determination as he swings a punch and a low cross, a high-low attack, to Roald's chin and his gut. Roald blocks the blow to his chin, but the gut-punch lands, and Roald's breath comes out in a whoosh.

I can't help grinning, but Roald's not the only one I have to worry about. Nia nods to Elliot, tilting her head toward me, and Elliot, like a dutiful little puppy wagging his tail and hoping to impress her, bounds over to me. He plants his feet and swings, but the windup takes long enough that I duck down.

But then I fall down as someone from behind me kicked the back of my knee. Then, Jett's there, standing over me, and he slices toward Elliot. Jett's fingers are claws, but he doesn't actually strike Elliot. The blow is just a warning strike, and it works well because Elliot moves on back a step.

I grin. I don't know why Bellanore's bullies are here or why they're willing to help come to my aid, but I'm not about to complain. Any enemy of my enemy is not my enemy. Is that how it goes? Because they aren't friends of mine, but I also don't trust them. For right this second, they can help, but I'm watching and wary in case they decide to change their mind and come after me instead. Or maybe they just want to be the ones to kill me, to torture Bellanore that way, by taking me out.

Because there's no way I can handle them.

They're all here—Wyatt, Jett, Gayle, and Mindy. Wyatt's entangled with Roald, Jett's with Elliot, and the three girls are even fighting.

I'm not sure where Decker is, but I'm not too worried about him as I inch over away from the male duos and watch the girls fight. I haven't seen Nia fight much before, and she's a dirty fighter, vicious. She drops down to the ground and sweeps Gayle to the ground. Immediately, Nia's on her feet, grabbing Mindy's shoulders, and she

yanks Mindy back to off-balance her and then reaps her leg so that Mindy falls down too.

By that time, Gayle's on her feet again, but Nia facepalms her and then draws her elbow back to hit Mindy right in the nose. It's a masterful move, and I'm amazed at Nia's fighting prowess even as it makes me want to find a hole to crawl in.

She's fighting so viciously as a human. There's no telling what she could do as a wolf.

Maybe she feels the heat of my stare because she turns away from the two girls who are both holding their faces. Nia stalks toward me as if she's a lioness and I'm a zebra. I guess I am in this case.

I back up, trying to increase the distance between us. I'm climbing the hill, which means I'm going a lot slower than she is. She grins that chilling grin of hers, and I know she thinks she has me.

She probably does.

Decker moves to stand beside me, and I don't have time to give him a head's up. I just grab his arm and force him to knock into her. They almost fall down, but I'm already racing away, trying to breathe, glad my vision has cleared but so not glad about this entire situation.

Decker grabs Nia's hand to help her up, and she snarls, her fingers turning into claws.

Wyatt smoothly steps between us, facing Nia. I sidestep just enough to see what's in his hand that has her fingers reappearing.

He brought along a knife.

"Let's go," Nia snaps.

Roald, who is fighting Jett, doesn't listen, not until Nia calls for a third time. Then the rough crowd leaves, even Decker.

Without a word and Wyatt still holding the knife, the bullies of my girlfriend all surround me.

Now what?

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Chapter 25

Bellanore

It's after dinner. Ellamaria and I have been talking about classes when I feel it.

Robb.

He's distressed.

I almost teleport immediately, but that wouldn't be fair to Ellamaria. She's in the dark too much as it is.

I grab her arm, and she pauses mid-sentence.

"What is it?" she asks.

"I have to go, but I don't want you to freak out, okay?"

"Go? Where? Why? What's going—"

She freaked out, but I can't stay. I teleport to the cave only to realize that Robb's not here. I can sense him nearby, close enough that I opt to run out of the cave and see if I can find him instead of trying to locate him through my magic and risk teleporting into a tree or, worse, into him.

Not there, not there.

There!

He's up a hill, the rough crowd all around him. Wait. The Spark pack members are there too!

As I run like my life depends on it, I'm shocked as the rough crowd all fall back and then race away, heading to the northeast. I slow down, watching them, ensuring that they're leaving. Once they're out of sight, I turn back to the hill.

The bullies—my bullies—all encircle Robb, and I rush over, prepared to defend them. I shove Wyatt to the side and stand in front of Robb.

"You aren't going to hurt him," I declare, throwing out my arms to keep Robb back, not even caring that this defensive position will make him look weak in their eyes.

A flash of silver almost blinds me. I blink a few times and spy the dagger in Wyatt's hand. His gaze follows mine, and when my gaze goes back to his face, Wyatt is smirking at me, and my fingers

automatically turn into claws.

Hands on my wrists force my arms to lower, and Robb slides over to stand beside me.

"They saved me," he murmurs.

"But…" I eye the dagger.

Wyatt, still smirking, holds up the dagger. It's clean, not a speck of blood on it, but that doesn't make me feel any better.

"Why?" I blurt out, glancing from Wyatt over to Jett. The two of them especially I don't trust. Mindy even gets a side-eye. Only Gayle do I not feel quite so worried about. If anything, I feel worried for her. Then again, if I can trust Gayle, can't I trust Decker? Ellamaria does, and I trust her, but Decker had been here. Had he fought Robb this time?

"You can't just accept what we did?" Wyatt snaps. "Your wolf was in trouble. We saved him."

"Why?" I echo.

"She's just annoyed she didn't get to save the day." Jett sneers.

I eye him coolly. "Yes, of course. Because I only ever care about myself."

"You think you can tell us what to do," Wyatt says. "It's only a matter of time before your dad or another demon comes here and tries to push his weight around."

I stiffen. "Why would you even think that a demon would care about a werewolf academy?" I demand.

Wyatt's nostrils flare. "Are you that ignorant?"

My eyes narrow. "Are you that obtuse?" I snap even though, let's be honest, if one of us is obtuse, it's me because I have no idea what he's going on about. Maybe he's full of it. I don't know.

"Why do you think vampires and werewolves have always been at odds with each other?" Wyatt asks.

"Because of everything dating back to the first vampire and werewolf—"

Wyatt's snort cuts me off. "Typical. You believe that crock."

"It's the truth!"

"Yeah, maybe for the first generation or two," Jett says.

"After that…" Wyatt spreads out his hands. "A vampire killed a werewolf. The wolf. Kept a paw on his belt."

"For no reason?" I ask dryly.

"For no reason," Wyatt says.

"Who do you think gave the vampire the idea to keep a wolf paw on his belt?" Jett asks.

"A demon," I mutter dully. "Are you serious?"

"Yes!" Wyatt snaps, stepping forward to invade my space. "Demons. Sowers of deceit. Champions of hatred. Advocates of—"

“Enough,” I snap. “Do you have any proof of this?”

“My grandfather—”

“Who wasn’t alive back then. If this is all hearsay—”

“You don’t think it’s possible?” Robb asks.

I wince. I shoot him a look that’s clearly *Et, tu, Brute?*

“You can’t blame all of this on demons,” I protest. “Werewolves have gone after vampires, and vampires have gone after werewolves. Not just now. Throughout all of time.”

“Yeah, but when have the students of the two academies ever done anything like this?” Wyatt asks.

“There have been attacks before—”

“Maybe one death before in all the time that the academies have stood,” Wyatt argues. “Now, though…”

“I don’t think a demon is behind this. I mean…”

“There was Nia and her boyfriend,” Gayle says mildly.

“Andre.” I mutter the name as if it’s a curse. “Chandler, his younger brother, does anyone know if he’s been involved in anything?”

Jett smirks. “No, but he’s just a first year, and his brother died. He’s a coward. I’m sure his father just loves him. Probably wishes Chandler died instead of Andre.”

“Jett!” Mindy scolds.

I roll my eyes. “You guys are seriously going to try to blame all of the fighting and killing on demons. There’s no proof—”

“Of course you would want proof of demon’s doing evil.” Wyatt barks a bitter laugh as he shakes his head.

“Whatever.” I ignore him and address Robb. “They really helped you? You have to know there’s an ulterior motive behind it.”

Wyatt reaches as if to grab me but then closes his fist and puts his arm by his side. “Go ahead. Don’t bother to thank us. There won’t be a second time that we come around to save his hide. Just remember that if it hadn’t been for us… who knows what might’ve happened.”

I grit my teeth and bite my tongue.

“Just give us a moment,” Robb asks.

Wyatt grimaces and then nods.

Robb pulls me to the side. “Don’t provoke them.”

“Me? They’re trying to provoke me!”

“Not trying. They’re succeeding.” He glances at them.

“Do you trust them?” I ask.

“No.”

“Do you think they’re right?”

Robb hesitates. “I have no idea what’s going on. There’s your dad, Zaun… demons have a hand in some of the goings-on here, but I don’t know if they do everything. I’m sure that werewolves would find a

way to fight vampires even without demonic influence."

"But it's also possible that another demon is involved… Or do you think Zaun is behind this too? What does he want? Why does he want a pack loyal to him?"

"I don't know," Robb says grimly, "but if they're going to play nice __"

"Antagonizing me isn't nice," I remind him.

"As nice as they can," he allows, "don't you think we should accept it?"

"No."

He grins. "Yeah, didn't think so."

I smile back and hold his hand. "Are you all right?"

"I'll live."

Oh, how weighted those words are.

"I'm going to go lay down and rest some," Robb says. "I'll see you soon."

He eyes me and then the others, waves to them, and then heads to the cave.

It's bold of him to leave me alone with the bullies, but I just stare Wyatt down.

"Think about what I said," he says, his words edged with deep distrust. "You'll see that things don't add up unless you add a bit of… outside interest."

I swallow hard but don't respond, and they start to walk away. After a few steps, Gayle glances over her shoulder. The others all leave, but Mindy realizes Gayle's with me yet and turns around. Gayle waves her on, and Mindy gives her a *really* look. With a huff, Mindy trails the others.

"I want to try to join the rough crowd," Gayle blurts out.

I gape at her. "No way. Why would you want to do that?"

"Because." Gayle releases a breath. "You deserve an apology. I'm sorry. I can't speak for the others, but… We were scared, you know? There aren't a lot of werewolves who come here with a demon for a dad."

"I can't help noticing that the only so-called demonic werewolf to be harassed is the only female one," I say dryly.

"Yeah…" Gayle hangs her head. "You saved me. I… I got in over my head with a bunch of stuff. I've made the wrong choices when it came to friends, and I don't… I want to make things right if I can. It's maybe too late for that, but I want to try at least."

"You can make it right by not associating with them. Find new friends."

"That's real easy to say, and it's not exactly like I can avoid Mindy and the others. They're in my pack, remember? Not all of us…" She

trails off.

"Not all of us can go around without their pack." I flinch and shake my head. Even when she's apologizing, she's still hurting me. I get that wasn't her intention, but it still hurts.

"I just…" Gayle blows out a breath. "Roald, Nia, and them… they're no good. Even Wyatt's on edge. Something isn't right with them, and there's no other way for us to know what's going on."

"That's not true," I protest.

"How can you say that?" Gayle asks skeptically.

I hesitate. It's not my place to out Decker as a possible mole. I'm not even sure if he qualifies as a mole. Has he given us any useful information?

Then again, it's rather demonic of me to be all *what have you done for me lately?*

"I don't think it's necessary for you to do this," I say slowly. "It's not safe."

"Safe or not… They're some of the reasons why the academy is under lockdown. They've attacked vampires, and they've gone after your wolf how many times? What do they have to do to get you to want to stop them at any cost? Are you even a demon at all? You should be thrilled that I'm willing to do this."

"I'm sorry, but I'm not okay with the idea of you endangering your life."

"It's my life, though. My life, my choice. I can do whatever I want."

"I saved your life," I say coldly. "I think it would make for a poor thank you if you go ahead and get yourself killed because you're too blind to see that there are other ways to make amends."

"I'm not just trying to make amends with you, okay?" Gayle says sharply. "I've done wrong. I've said and done things I shouldn't to more people than just you, and if I think I can help to bring down an entire group of werewolves who are going out of their way to sow seeds of hatred and anger and spark fights, why shouldn't I?"

"Gayle…"

"You don't have to accept my apology. It's fine. We probably aren't ever going to be friends, and that's fine too, but just because you saved my life doesn't mean that you can tell me how to live the rest of that life."

"Gayle, wait."

She holds up her hand to stop me. "I wish I hadn't said anything to you. I just wanted you to not think that I was going from one bad group to another, but I can't even leave the first, though, so… I just have to do this my way, and you can think what you want. Go ahead. Think I'm stupid. Your opinion doesn't matter to me." She turns to

walk away.

"Gayle, Decker might not be in on it."

The werewolf hesitates and turns her head to the side, not quite looking over her shoulder at me. "That so?"

"Yeah. Whatever is going on, I don't know if he's a part of it. I thought you should know in case you were going to try to talk to him."

She nods curtly and starts to rush off.

"Gayle," I call. "Be careful!"

She doesn't acknowledge me.

Why do I think this is going to end very, very badly?

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Chapter 26

Robb

The wounds I suffered aren't that terrible today, and I don't find any new cuts. A few scraps, some tender ribs, and more than a handful of bruises. I'm sure I'll be even more colorful tomorrow.

I remove my shirt and stretch. It should be a relaxing move, but stretching is painful. My muscles are stiff, and the burning sensation returns to some of the scars on my chest. Why's that? I don't know. Maybe my body is just pushed to the limit and is trying to fight back. I can't be sure.

With a groan, I sit with my back to the wall, the same spot I'd been sitting with the cat. Honestly, I already miss her, and I have no way to know if she'll ever come back. Maybe she sensed the other werewolves, but why would they scare her when I hadn't? Or maybe she sensed their malcontent, their rage, their hatred.

I close my eyes to try to shove the troubling thoughts away and wait for Bellanore.

It takes a few minutes longer than I would've thought for Bellanore to enter the cave. I've debated exiting to see if she's still talking—or, more likely, arguing—with the bullies, but she's here now, and I give her a wan smile.

"You should maybe move," she says softly as she comes to sit beside me.

"Move over?"

"No. Move to somewhere else. Roald knows you're here. If you're elsewhere…"

If I'm elsewhere, the cat might not be able to find me.

Then again, cats are hunters or at least can hunt when they want to. If she could sense the curse and magic on me before, maybe she'll be able to find me elsewhere.

"Are you suggesting that I…" I eye her.

Her cheeks flush. "I can sleep on the floor," she says slowly.

"You want me to move in with you. Isn't that a bit forward of you?"

“I want to make sure you don’t die,” she snaps. “Your friends have turned into enemies.”

“They were never friends,” I protest.

“Who you spend time with is a reflection of who you are.”

“I told you before. They—”

“It’s not that hard to walk away. You have legs. They work.”

“For now.”

She inhales and exhales several times before rolling her eyes. “I don’t understand yoga,” she mumbles.

“Don’t knock it until you try it.”

“I… I’m still upset.”

“Upset with me?”

“With everything! Your never friends or whatever are worse than my bullies. My bullies protected you! Why? They never said. Why are Roald and Nia coming after you?”

“I don’t know. Maybe she figured out I tampered with her poison. It’s pretty clear that we aren’t for them and that we aren’t against the vampires just because they’re alive. Alive-ish. Whatever. We don’t want to kill every vampire we see, so if we aren’t with them, we’re against them. In their minds.”

“But why would Wyatt—”

“To mess with Roald? I don’t know. I don’t care.”

“You’re grateful.”

“Well… yes.”

I exhale. “Please consider moving in with me. We can hide you there. You’ll be safe. I’ll have the door locked at all times—”

“You want me chained to the bed too?” I ask dryly.

“No.”

I blink a few times. “I would hope not,” I mutter.

My attempt to get her to smile fails, and she stands and starts to pace. “We have to get to the bottom of this.”

“Bottom of what?”

“This claim that the demons are behind all of the animosity! If the demons are somehow affecting the students here, maybe that’s why there’s so much fighting, not just between werewolves and vampires but with the bullies, with the rough crowd… Maybe there is something to it.”

“Or maybe we should just ignore all of that.”

She pauses just long enough to glare at me. “Why would we do that? How can we do that? The rough crowd—”

“Yes, they came after me, but I have legs. I’ll just walk away. Isn’t that what you said I should do?”

Bellanore throws up her hands, clearly exasperated with me, and I don’t blame her. I love to get her going, though. Her passion is a sight

to see, and she's fighting for me. What guy wouldn't want that?

Although I'm like most guys, and I wish I didn't need her to fight for me. I want to handle my own battles, but my body is a traitorous cage.

"If you're in my room, you'll be safe. I can keep you safe." She sits across from me and holds my hands tightly. "I know you don't want to hide away, but…"

"I've been doing that all year anyhow?" I ask grimly.

"Well, yeah…"

"I'll think about it."

"You'll think about it? What is there to think about?"

"You want to smuggle me into your room in a castle filled with female werewolves. They'll be able to smell me. We'll have to trust them all. Not only that, but if I'm discovered, and let's be honest, it's not that hard to figure out that I might be in your room. If they want to find me, they'll find me, whether I'm here, in your room, or somewhere else on this campus."

"So we'll use flowers to disguise your scent," she says desperately.

"Bellanore, is the only reason why you want me in your room because of wanting to keep me safe?"

"Does there need to be another reason?" she asks.

I huff a breath out my nose. Yes, there should be another one, but clearly, she's not thinking like that.

Bellanore eyes me, and then her gaze falls to my bare chest. She sucks in a breath and touches the topmost scar on my chest. I don't mean to, but I flinch away from her touch even though it's gentle and doesn't hurt any.

"Let me tend to your wounds," she murmurs.

"You can't. I'm just bruised. No new scars gained this time. That's a good thing."

"A good thing would be a day when you aren't in danger," she counters.

"Well, that's my life, day in and day out up until the day I die."

Her eyes narrow. I would've thought my depressed speech would've made her sorrowful, but instead, her eyes flash, almost looking red for a second.

"You took more, didn't you?" she accuses.

"It was either take more or not sleep, take more or not breathe, take more or risk dying."

"So that's a yes."

I almost laugh. "Yes, it's a yes."

"That's it. I'm going to find a witch and—"

"Pay with what money? I don't have much at all after paying tuition for three years up front."

“You paid for all three years?”

“Yes, with the money—”

“From selling your house. Did you really think you would be here for three years? That you would kill… That you wouldn’t die?”

“I figured that if I died, it would be a donation to the school, that they could give my slot to someone else. Back then, I thought the school was a decent one. Given the students here, I’m not so sure that’s the case anymore.”

Bellanore releases my hand and rubs her forehead. “There’s more than one way to get a witch to do what you want.”

“Blackmail?” I ask, shocked she would consider that route.

“There’s nothing I won’t do to help you,” she says firmly.

“You’ll turn demonic for it.”

“I can’t turn demonic,” she says, her tone now cold. “I *am* demonic.”

“They say that necromancers first learned how to use their powers because they were motivated out of love.”

“Yes.”

“Some called that love obsession, though,” I add.

“I can’t blame you if you’re obsessed with me,” she says lightly.

“Who says I’m obsessed with you? If anything, you’re obsessed with me. You’re the one who showed up when I was getting attacked.”

Hmm. Actually, you did that too,” she points out.

I yawn.

“Don’t let me keep you up,” Bellanore says. “You can go to sleep.”

She eyes me and waits.

“I’m not sleeping in your bed.”

“Why not?”

“That’s weird.”

“A lot of guys—”

“I’m not most guys.”

“I know. That’s why I’m not extending this offer to any other guy.”

“Maybe…” I was about to make a joke of some kind, but another yawn cuts me off, which is probably for the best because the joke wasn’t all that funny, and she probably wouldn’t have appreciated it anyhow.

“I’ll stay here then while you recover.”

“No. You go.”

“I don’t want to.”

“I want you to go.”

“Why? You don’t want me around?”

“I don’t want a babysitter,” I grumble.

“I’m not babysitting you,” she protests.

“I don’t need a death watch either.”

She crosses her arms. “You’re the most difficult werewolf alive, you know that?”

“Well, that might not be an issue much longer.”

“That’s it,” she declares, jumping to her feet.

“You’re going to go all demon on a witch, aren’t you?”

“I’m going to do what I have to,” she declares.

And she teleports out of there.

Not two seconds later, a bundle of black fur comes rushing in. The meows are too fast for me to understand.

“Calm down,” I try to tell the cat, but when I go to pick her up, she almost claws me. “Hey!”

“Who said that?” she meows.

“You were eavesdropping?” I accuse. I have my hands up so that the cat can’t hurt me.

“You’re friends with someone who wants to go all—”

“That someone is trying to help me.”

“You’re beyond help.”

“I know that. She knows that, but she doesn’t want to accept that.” I slowly lower my arms, hoping the cat won’t change her mind and attempt to claw me again. “Why did you leave earlier?”

“Why do you think?”

“Ah, so you’re a scaredy-cat,” I tease.

The cat flashes her claws. “I should kill you for that.”

“You’d save me the trouble.”

“If I could, I would give you one of my nine lives.”

“Cats don’t really have nine lives,” I argue.

“Don’t we?” she meows.

I lift my eyebrows.

She makes a soft whine that might be a feline sigh. “*Witches. Witches can’t bear to let us die.*”

“Witches aren’t necromancers,” I counter.

“Oh, ye of little faith.”

“It’s not really nine lives. They just heal you from the brink of death. They don’t actually bring you back.”

“Close enough.”

“I suppose so, but that won’t help me any.” I lean back, my head resting against the stone wall. After a moment, I crack my eyes open. “I wasn’t sure you would come back.”

“I wasn’t sure I would either.”

“Why did you?”

“I’m a sucker for lost causes.”

“Geez, thanks.”

“You asked. Want me to lie next time?”

“No. I hate liars.”

“Me too.” The cat starts to lick her paw.

I settle down and must have dozed off. At some point, the scent of food makes me stir, but I’m too tired to eat it.

A few days pass. Bellanore still asks me repeatedly to move in with her, but it’s not what I want. I’ve considered looking around campus for another cave, but I don’t. I’m still exhausted and recovering from everything.

That night, I’m so exhausted that I don’t wake when Bellanore brings me dinner. Eventually, I stir and realize the cat is hissing, her back arched unnaturally high.

“What is it?” I ask through a yawn.

She hisses at me and swats something over to me. I expect a dead rat or something, but no. It’s a patch of fur.

Confused, I pick it up. Inside is a canine.

“What in the world?” I ask. “Did you bring this here?”

“I just woke up. It was here. I don’t like it.”

“I don’t know what it is to have an opinion on it.”

“Werewolf fur.”

My stomach churns, and I grab my phone, but before I can call Bellanore, she’s already here.

“You’re so distressed that you woke me up. Do you have any idea what time it is?” she asks. She glances down at her matching purple shirt and short pajamas set, crosses her arms, and then tugs down on the shorts.

“No idea.” I stand and hand her the fur and canine.

Her eyes widen and then shut. Her hand glows a bit, a faint green color, similar to her eyes. When she opens them, her eyes are covered with tears.

“It’s Gayle,” she babbles. “I told her not to try to… She… By the moon, do you think this means… Why would they send it here?”

“Who?” I ask. “What are you talking about?”

The cat looks back and forth between us. “I think I might want to skedaddle.”

“You really are a scaredy-cat,” I mutter. “Bellanore?”

“Wait.” The cat jerks away from Bellanore and makes a face as if she smelled something rancid. “She’s the one who went after a witch.”

Bellanore blinks a few times as if coming out of a daze. Her shoulders slump, and she almost seems like a turtle, as if she wants to hide inside herself. I’ve never seen her looking like this before, and I don’t want to see it now.

“I went to see a witch, yes, but none of them will help, can help, all that.” She eyes the cat. “Will your witch help?”

The cat snorts. “She’s dead.”

“Figures. Everyone around us is dropping like flies.”

How can she talk to the cat over me at a time like this?

“Bellanore, are you trying to say this is… That this belongs to Gayle?” I ask.

The werewolf-demon shudders. “No. It belonged to Gayle.”

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Chapter 27

Bellanore

I'm furious, livid, incensed, enraged. I'm seething with anger, but I can't react based on emotions. If I do that, I'll end up dead too.

"I need to—" I turn to go.

Robb moves faster than I would've thought possible, and he grabs my arm. "No. What do you mean it belonged to Gayle?"

"I told her not to, but after everything went down with the bullies helping you…"

"When you took so long to come see me," he says.

I nod. "Gayle wanted to talk. She wanted to try to infiltrate the rough crowd. I tried to get her to realize it was a bad idea, that they're bad news, that Decker might not even make what she wanted necessary…"

"It's not your fault."

I grab my hair in two clumps and tug hard, wanting to feel the pain, wanting to feel anything, something other than the agony that is in each beat of my heart. "I didn't stop her. I should've. I… I had no idea that this would happen. I mean, I was afraid something like this could happen, but…"

"How can you be so sure she's dead?" Robb insists. "Maybe they're just holding her captive."

"No, Robb," I say tenderly, my heart breaking all over again. How I wish he was right! "The fur and the canine being here is nothing more than a warning. You're next."

"They might still have her," Robb says stubbornly. "We need to—"

"No, there's no 'we,'" I say firmly.

"Ouch." The cat eyes me. "You really don't pull your punches, do you?"

I glance from the black cat with its green eyes to Robb. "When did you get a cat?"

"I claimed him," the cat meows.

"No one ever lets me pick or choose if I want to be friends with them or not," Robb says. "I'm just picked and don't have a say in the

matter."

"Well, you can't go wrong by me."

The cat seems smart. I've always thought animals are a lot smarter than most people give them credit for, and after talking to them a bit, that definitely is the case. Now, being smart and acting smart are two very different things.

I squat down. "Can you do me a favor?"

"Why would I do that? What's in it for me?"

"Keep Robb here."

"Why?"

"What are you planning?" Robb asks suspiciously.

"You can't help with this."

"The hell I can't."

"Robb, you need to either stay here in this cave where you're a sitting duck, or you need to go to Ellamaria and stay with her."

"It's the middle of the night," he protests. "What do you have to do right now that's so urgent?"

"I need you to trust me."

"No, Bellanore. How about you trust me? I've earned that right. I've never gone after your father. I'm dying because I'm allowing him to live. The least you can do is not be foolish and allow me to know what is going on."

I exhale and try to fight back a wave of panic. "Maybe there is a chance Gayle's alive. It won't be easy to get her back. She's clearly injured if she is somehow alive. I need to go and do some scouting."

"That's a lie."

I set my jaw.

"You might start out scouting, but you want to seek out Nia, don't you? That's why you want me to hang back. You want to fight her."

Close. I want to end her, but I don't voice that aloud.

Instead, I say, "You aren't ready to fight anyone."

"I'll never be ready."

A werewolf who can't fight. One who can't hunt. Is there a point to living when you can't take care of yourself?

Of course. You're supposed to survive because of your pack. Your pack is supposed to take care of you.

It's impossible to realize when exactly it happened, but Gayle, one of my bullies, has become a part of my self-made pack.

"Your body might not recognize it, but you're in my pack," I say to Robb. I reach out and squeeze his hands. "You have to know that I will do whatever I can to save you. Right now, I can't protect you and Gayle. If she's alive, I need to go after her alone."

"If I drink—"

"Do you think I can't handle Nia?"

“Nia? One on one? Maybe you can take her, but there’s no guarantee that it’ll just be the two of you.”

“Why do you think I want to go now in the middle of the night? It betters the chances of it just being her and me.”

Robb blows out a breath.

“I don’t want you to drink more Mystic Twilight.”

“I asked Zaun for something,” he confesses.

I blink a few times, too shocked to speak.

“He hasn’t, and maybe he won’t, but if he wants me to go up against your dad…”

“You’re trying to buy yourself more time.” I swallow hard.

“I have more life to live yet,” he says hoarsely, squeezing my hands.

Tears prickle my eyes, but I refuse to cry. For him, I can be strong, and I can see that same sentiment in his eyes.

Somehow, the Mystic Twilight is allowing him to feel. I’ve realized that for some time now, but it still amazes me that he can feel so deeply for me.

“I will come back,” I assure him.

“You two are gross,” the cat meows.

“No one asked you,” Robb tells the cat.

“What’s so gross?” I ask.

“Look. You don’t get nine lives. He and I have been over that. You only get one. If you want to live happy lives, just scram.”

Scram.

Run away.

Just the two of us.

Forget about Nia and Roald and Wyatt.

Pretend they don’t exist.

But the curse will catch up to us.

In the meantime, we might be able to have peace and can live out the rest of Robb’s short life being happy together.

And the war that’s brewing between werewolves and vampires isn’t going to just end if we leave.

No, running away isn’t an option.

“We’re wolves,” Robb growls. “We aren’t scaredy-cats.”

I nod. “That’s not an option for us.”

“Running away would’ve saved my witch,” the cat meows sadly.

“Who killed her?” I ask.

“If you’re going to go, get going,” Robb says in a tone that has me looking at him, really looking.

And I don’t like what I’m seeing.

His face isn’t just pale.

It’s ashen. A little gray.

My heart breaks, and I squeeze his hands and then embrace him. When I feel the tears start to fall, I can't take it anymore, and I teleport away.

When I open my eyes, I can still feel Robb's arms around me even though he's not near me anymore. I'm across campus, near the castle I live in.

Pushing aside emotions that are so deeply ingrained isn't easy, but I close my eyes and seek out the scent of Nia. I sense her to the north of the campus, and I teleport closer. Yes, she's this way, up ahead, near a stream by some trees.

She's also alone.

Nia sits on a boulder jutting up from the water, filing her claws, sharpening them. She doesn't look up as I approach, and I don't bother to move silently. I just come to the water's edge and stare her down.

Head still lowered, Nia smirks, but she says nothing.

"What can be done so Gayle can be turned over?" I demand.

"Are you so certain she's alive and not dead?"

My heart skips a beat. "Alive or dead, I want her."

"Why would you want her dead body?"

Goosebumps appear on my arms. Is that her way of confirming that Gayle is dead?

"Alive or dead, I want her," I repeat.

"What do we want?" Nia asks. She taps a claw against her cheek. "It's simple, really. All we want is you and Robb dead."

"You want us out of the way," I say dully.

"Permanently," she says with a smug little smirk.

"Why us?"

"With you two out of the way, we can do what we want."

"You mean what *you* want," I correct.

Nia just grins vindictively.

I'm not stupid. I plant my feet and have my claws ready. While Nia transforms into her wolf, I remain my human self. She leaps into the air, heading to my right, and I gauge the angle and teleport. Right when she lands, I'm behind her, and I claw at her tail. My fingers return, and I grab the tail. With every bit of my strength, I start to spin, forcing her up off the ground, and I toss her into the stream.

She lands on her feet, and she comes barreling at me.

Again, I teleport, but I misjudge slightly. The boulder isn't as steady as Nia made it appear, and the boulder teeters over, and I go under. The water of the stream isn't all that high, but it's cold.

Worse, Nia's jumped onto my back, two paws pinning my head beneath the water.

With her touching me, when I teleport, she comes too, but I

teleport onto a tree branch. All I have to do is tip over to the side, and she starts to fall. Her claws go to dig into my skin to keep her in place, but I teleport to another branch in time to watch her fall.

It's times like these that I wish I wasn't so afraid of fire because I would love to burn Nia's claws. Just her claws. I don't want to burn her and leave her scarred. I'm not a monster. I'm a demon, but not a monster.

But Nia… the look in her eyes as she starts to wallcrawl her way up the tree toward me… she's the one to look demonic.

If she gets the chance, she won't hesitate to kill me.

This battle might very well be one to the death.

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Chapter 28

Robb

I can't help it. I am not going to just stay here like a lost puppy.

I stand.

The cat runs over and places her paws on my feet. *Where do you think you're going?*

"I need to go."

"You can't."

"I can, and I will."

The cat sniffs and rubs against my legs. "You shouldn't."

"Why? Don't tell me you're on Bellanore's side, that you're going to do her bidding."

"Nice try. I'm not doing her bidding. I want you to stay here."

"It's not safe here."

"Safer here than out there."

Maybe that's true, but I'm not going to give the cat any credit for that.

"All I want is for someone to not leave me."

"I can't be that someone. Go find an old lady who has a dozen other acts already."

"I'm not a multi-cat cat."

"What?"

"I'm more of a clan of two. Me and you. This is the way."

"What are you talking about?"

"Pack of two. That better, wolf? I thought you were smarter than that."

"I'm not smart."

"Clearly not if you're leaving." The cat shudders and arches her back.

"What is it?"

"So much hatred and anger here. I don't like it."

"Then leave."

"If I leave, you'll die."

"You don't know that."

“I might not have magic, but I’ve been around it enough to know that your time is coming. Cats know death.”

“Why aren’t you familiars of grim reapers instead of witches then?”

The cat shudders. “We know death because the world likes to try to kill us. Witches bring us back. Grim reapers let us die and cross over.”

“Ah, so you want to cheat death as much as possible.”

“I thought you did too.”

I swallow hard. “I do.”

“If you leave, you have a death wish.”

“Not true,” I protest. “I want to try to ensure that there are no deaths. No more deaths.”

“Werewolves are hunters. You kill to survive.”

“The werewolves lately have been killing for other reasons.”

“No, it’s for survival. It’s also to try to make the vampires extinct, but it’s because, bottom line, you want to survive.”

“Roald and the others…”

“They must view you as a threat. Clearly, they’re idiots because if they wait long enough, you’ll die without them having to lift a claw.”

“Geez, thanks.”

“Welcome.”

I roll my eyes and step over her and accidentally land on her tail. She shrieks, and I hop to release her and then almost fall. My palm scrapes against the harsh stone wall, but I manage not to fall.

“You want to go out there and do what exactly? Because if you say fight…”

“I just want to talk.”

The cat snorts. “You might want to talk, but they want you dead so…”

“How about you come with me?”

“And what? Be your guardian cat?”

I chuckle. “Why not?”

“I don’t have magic. I can’t bring you back.”

“No, but you can go and tell Bellanore what happened to me.”

“You think this will kill you.”

“It’s possible. I can only outlive this curse for so long.”

“You want me to tell her what exactly?”

“That I love her and I’m sorry.”

“And you didn’t tell her this already because…”

“I wasn’t sure I could even say it,” I admit.

“I’m sorry is hard to say.”

“Not the apology. The love part.”

“Love isn’t a bad word,” the cat meows.

“No, but my emotions…”

“Wolf, you’re stupid. She isn’t. She might be a bit hotheaded, and I get that she’s passionate and cares about you and all, but wanting to go after witches… I like her, and I don’t.”

“Isn’t that how cats always feel about people?”

“No. Some people we don’t care for. Some we hate. So that I like her at all is saying something.”

“Ah.”

“She knows you love her.”

“I still want her to hear it.”

“Then tell her yourself.”

I roll my eyes. “You coming?”

“I guess. Think there will be food there?”

“Doubtful.”

“Rats.”

The cat races off, and I head to the edge of the cave. The cat trots over and slurps a tail.

“Did you just… Forget it. I don’t want to know.”

We keep walking, the cat rubbing against my legs every so often, maybe to remind me that I’m not alone. I feel all alone, though. Worse, I’m terrified. This talk might not be a talk. Roald might want to finish what he tried to start several times now. I have no reason to think he’ll want to hear me out or that he’ll engage me in conversation, but I have to try.

The scent of Roald is one that I can smell even in my sleep, courtesy of all the times the guy came swinging at me. Musky and oranges. I guess there are worst smells, but I’ve never liked oranges. Clementines, though? Those I like, though. I can eat three or four of them in one sitting, but I hate that my hands smell like the fruit all day.

Roald’s scent leads me to his castle. He’s pacing out front. The moon isn’t full tonight, but she’s almost there, casting a silver halo around the wolf. Elliot and Decker aren’t anywhere to be seen.

“That the guy?” the cat meows softly.

I nod.

“That the—”

“Yes,” I hiss in a whisper.

Roald’s head jerks up, and he stops pacing. His gaze locks onto me, and he cracks his knuckles.

I hold up my hands. “I’m not here to fight. I just want to talk.”

“About…”

“Gayle. Is she…”

Roald closes his eyes briefly, and when he opens them, I’m shocked to see guilt.

“I tried to stop her,” he mumbles.

“Gayle?”

“Nia,” he snaps.

“Nia’s assumed command, hasn’t she?” I ask.

Roald nods. I never realized the movement could be filled with such bitterness.

“I can already feel my wolf,” he says, his voice seeping with agony. “My wolf wants to respond to her as if she’s my alpha. I don’t understand! Why? She’s gone off the deep end. She’s lost her mind!”

“You aren’t sure if you can fight her.”

“I can take her on in a fight,” Roald says.

“Are you sure about that?”

Roald grinds his teeth.

“It’s now or never. You said you wanted to be an alpha to Elliot, Decker, Nia… Either be an alpha or submit.”

“It’s not that simple,” Roald protests.

“You want to know what’s simple? You can continue to whine and complain and bemoan the fact that you’re too weak to stop Nia from taking over control away from your alpha. Because you have an alpha, don’t you? You’re just the only Jagger to attend here, like Decker’s the only Wind. He still has a pack. Nia, though…”

“If she thought she could take her alpha on, she would not hesitate to challenge him.”

I gape at him. “She has a full pack?”

“Yes. I thought you knew that.”

“I thought…”

“She’s the only Forge here.”

“But…”

I should have realized this before, but the deadness in Nia’s eyes… I thought she was shut off to emotions because of her lacking a pack. I thought she was like me.

Why is she so emotionless? Why is she able to separate herself from her pack as if she has none?

“She’s not going to actually go against her alpha, is she?” I ask. The thought of her being the alpha of a huge pack makes me want to howl. She’ll have far too much power if she has a ton of wolves behind her. She hates vampires, and she’ll use her pack to bring down as many vampires as possible. There’s no doubting that. Her actions will get countless werewolves killed.

“She clearly doesn’t need to go against him if my wolf wants to submit to her,” Roald grumbles.

“Why do you want to be away from the Jagger pack?” I ask.

Roald glowers at me. “I don’t need to explain myself to you. I have my reasons.”

“You might as well share if you want to have any help in preventing yourself from joining Nia’s new pack.”

“Elliot’s already submitted to her,” Roald utters in a low tone.

“But Elliot’s not even all alone here. There are other Snowblood members already attending here. His tie to his pack should be stronger than that!”

“It’s not. We’re all outsiders in our packs. I thought you knew that. Did you listen to anything I ever said to you?” he growls.

“I don’t like him,” the cat meows.

Roald stares at the cat.

“She said—”

“I know what she said,” Roald snaps. He actually laughs, his face relaxing for the first time in months. Maybe even since the first time I met him. “I’m a dog person, so I’m not surprised you don’t like me.”

“You don’t want Nia to be your alpha.”

“No. Haven’t you been listening either?”

“So don’t let her be your alpha.”

“It’s not that simple. You wouldn’t understand. You’re just a cat.”

The cat bristles. “Say something like that again, and I’ll claw you.”

Roald rolls his eyes but says nothing.

“You don’t want your alpha to be your alpha either.”

“Right,” Roald mutters.

“Why?” I can’t help asking again.

“My mom died when I was born,” Roald says gruffly. “My dad became a guard.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“It’s not your fault—”

“She didn’t die giving birth to me! She died because we were ambushed by another wolf pack. That’s why Dad became a guard, but the alpha grew lax. At first, Dad and the other guards alerted us to when that pack—Lunastar—would be coming around, but as the years went by without any attacks, the alpha said we didn’t need guards. The alpha stopped paying the guards, and Dad had no job, so he had to get a job in a human city. He worked at a bank. There was a robbery…”

“Your dad was killed.”

Roald nods. “All because the alpha thought we were safe, but not two weeks after Dad died, Lunastar attacked us. We weren’t ready, and three more werewolves died. The alpha… He’s not my alpha. He hasn’t been. He doesn’t deserve to be alpha.”

“So why don’t you go after him? Why don’t you challenge him? Why doesn’t someone, anyone in your pack rise up and force him to back down?”

“He has dire wolf blood in him. He’s not a normal werewolf. His wolf is three times the size of other werewolves.” Roald blows out a breath. “He likes to argue and pick fights. He also likes to drink, and that’s when he starts to insult people. I bet he insulted the Lunastar alpha. I’m sure he’s the reason why we’ve been attacked. He had a hand in the death of my parents.”

“You’re an orphan,” I murmur.

“Way to twist the knife a little more,” Roald snaps.

“You’ve rejected your alpha already. That’s why your wolf is keen to submit to Nia. Roald, you have to fight her.”

“I want to,” Roald admits, “but to fight a woman…”

“Nia’s not really a woman. She’s a monster,” I say. “I knew it from the first time I met her. “You need to stand up to her.”

Roald hangs his head. “I don’t know if I can.”

“If you don’t think you can do it, you can’t.”

“I didn’t ask you, cat,” Roald snaps.

“You wolves want loyalty, right? Why don’t you be loyal to your parents? Why don’t you be loyal to you?”

“A pack of one? That’s not possible!”

“This Nia needs to be stopped. Her alpha isn’t doing it. Her parents aren’t controlling her. Why can’t you turn the tables on her and get her to submit to you?”

Roald grimaces. “I don’t know if anyone can stop her,” he mumbles. “She killed Gayle. Gayle… We had her tied up. I didn’t even want to do that. I just wanted to talk to her some, maybe threaten her, and let her go. But not Nia. No, she knew she was a spy from the beginning. She waited for the perfect moment to pounce, and she killed Gayle without hesitating, without talking to us first. She just acted.”

“That’s why your wolf is acknowledging her,” I say.

Roald nods grimly. “No more. My wolf and I… We can do better. We need to do better.”

“If you want my help, you have it.”

Roald eyes me. “From the moment I saw you, I knew you looked like a wolf who could handle himself. I… I felt a little threatened by you.”

“Never meant for you to feel that way.”

“I know I’ve done wrong by you,” Roald says gruffly, “but if you mean what you say…”

“I do.”

Roald nods. “I’m going to need your help.”

“My help too?” the cat meows eagerly.

Roald hesitates.

“She’s going to come regardless of what you say,” I point out.

Roald sighs. “You can come.”

The cat purrs, but I don’t understand why she’s so happy. Nia’s unhinged. She’s a rogue wolf, and there’s no telling what she’s capable of.

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Chapter 29

Bellanore

I don't wait for Nia to finish climbing up the tree. Without a care in the world, I jump off the branch, transform into a raven, and fly down to peck at her eyes. It's not until I almost strike her that I realize I outed myself as a shifter of all kinds. Too late now.

Nia swats me. Her paw knocks into my wing, and I start to fall, but I shift into a snake and bite her tail. She wiggles her tail back and forth and slams me into the tree, but as soon as I recover, I'm already slithering through her fur and up to her neck. My fangs sink deep into her, but I don't think I changed into a venomous snake. I should probably do some research on that.

Nia drops down from the tree and lands on her paws. Almost immediately, she transforms back into her human, and she reaches behind and yanks me right off her even though doing so tears and rips her skin.

Blood fills my mouth, and I spit it out right into her face. She holds me out like a string, and she even goes to try to tie me in a knot, but I just turn into an elephant.

Yes, an elephant.

I clearly didn't think that through, and my massive body causes a tree to start to uproot. My trunk picks Nia up, and she turns her fingers into claws and scraps my skin. My hide is tough, but her claws are sharpened more than normal, and the scent of my blood fills my nose.

With a flick of my head, I toss Nia onto the other side of the stream. She starts toward me, but I put my trunk in the stream. The water is cold, and it takes me longer than it should to figure out how to suck up water. I go to hose her down, but she's already reached me, her full work again. She jumps on top of my trunk and tries to climb up it to reach my head, but I shift into a butterfly and fly up way too high, fluttering my wings to laugh as she plummets to the ground.

Again, she lands on her feet. It's as if she's part-cat.

All of the constant transformations have me feeling a bit tired. My

body is sore, and my wings don't want to flutter, but I don't want to stop. I need to be… What? My wolf or myself. I'm most comfortable in those forms, and since she's a wolf, maybe I should—

"Nia!" a strong voice calls out.

I glance to the right. Two forms emerge from the trees. No. Three. Two males and a cat.

Roald, Robb, and the cat.

Roald puts his hands on his hips. "Nia, you need to stop."

The wolf lets out a howl.

Roald's body shakes. I'm not sure why, but then he turns into his wolf. He's lowering down.

Submitting? Is he submitting to her?

No. He lunges at her, and the two of them go at it, attacking each other as if their lives depend on it.

Exhausted, I fly over to Robb and the cat. My wings flutter wildly, but I'm flying lower and lower. The cat swats at me, and I collapse to the ground, shifting back to myself.

Robb bends down and tries to help me up, but we both fall down. I shift to sit and watch the two wolves. It's hard to tell since clouds have covered the moon, but it takes a moment to realize that Roald is the one swatting at Nia.

She counters and then blocks his next attempt and streaks her claws down his chest.

"I should go help," I say, starting to stand.

The cat promptly jumps into my lap. "No," she meows.

"I have to." I stand, but this time, Robb grabs my arm.

"Maybe you should let them sort this out."

"But… Fine. While he handles her, we can go search for Gayle."

Robb just shakes his head.

Fury laces through me, and my fingers turn to claws. I'm ready to throw Robb aside if I have to in order to put an end to this, but Nia turns her paw into a hand and throws a rock at Roald. It hits his temple. He goes down hard, his paws unable to keep him upright.

Worse, Nia yanks him over onto his back. She stands on top of him, her hands both paws now, and she presses down on his neck, choking him.

Robb can't hold me back any longer. I dart forward. "Nia, stop! You're killing him!"

The embankment is slick, and they're near the water's edge. I slide toward them.

But I'm too late.

Nia made Roald unconscious, but then she used her claws and… I turn aside, sick at the sight of her savagery. The water of the stream is tinged red and silver from blood and the now uncovered moon's light.

But Nia isn't finished. She gives me a wide, bloody smile, and then she starts toward me, her intent plain.

She probably wanted Roald dead all along too. Robb and I are next on her to-kill list.

My stomach churns as I struggle to think about what to turn to, how to defend myself… My mind races about how I can keep Robb safe…

Teleportation. It's the only way.

But I can't even teleport from this spot to him, and we're not that far apart as it is.

The cat rushes over, and I've waited too long. Nia knocks me down. Her wolf is heavy, and I shove up my arms to keep her chin up and her mouth away from me. I'm able to lift her just high enough that her claws can't reach my chest, but they can reach my arms, and she slices into them. The stinging, burning sensation of her tearing my flesh causes me to hiss, but I don't dare bend my elbows.

"What is the meaning of this?" a familiar voice asks, his tone stern.

Headmaster Virgil Thorn. How good of him to have come. Not.

"Nia Forge, you will come here right now."

That voice is unfamiliar, although the wolf in me recognizes the owner as an alpha.

Nia backs away slowly, reluctantly. I wonder if she has a choice in the matter or if I'm onto something, if Roald had been struggling not to submit to her. But that would mean she's nearly an alpha herself. She can't have an alpha above her.

I stagger to my feet the moment she finally climbs down from my body.

"Nia, you have been charged with killing a student," the headmaster says. "How do you plead?"

"She killed more than one," Robb says. "She killed Gayle Spark and Roald Jagger."

"Is this true?" The headmaster gapes at her.

Nia lifts her head, looking as defiant as ever. "Who says I did? Robb? A cursed werewolf?"

Robb stiffens. "We just watched you…"

"Where's the body?" she asks with a wry smile.

I go to point, but the stream's already carried the body and the head away. "Down the stream," I mumble as I force my legs that feel as heavy as tree trunks to move until I stand beside Robb and face her. The cat rubs against my legs as if to welcome me back to the land of the living, but I hardly feel as if that's the case. My entire body is numb, and I'm even numb emotionally.

What just happened?

"And I said you killed Gayle." Decker emerges from the shadows of

the tree I almost uprooted.

"Is this true?" the headmaster repeats.

Nia says nothing, just gives a coy, little smirk.

"I will deal with Nia," the alpha says. Her alpha?

"Very well," the headmaster says, "but she is not to set paw on Moonstone Academy ground ever again. Is that clear?"

"Answer him," the alpha explodes.

Nia winces. "Yes," she mumbles.

"I don't think he heard you."

She flinches. "Yes."

The alpha waves her ahead, and Nia bristles. Her pace slows as she approaches him, and she bristles, flinching away from him as she walks in front of him. She's clearly afraid of him, and it makes me wonder if the alpha is abusive. If that's the case, then we just might've made things worse.

"Get back to bed," the headmaster dictates.

"What about Roald's body?" Robb asks.

The headmaster eyes him. "He will be recovered. I will not repeat myself."

I fall into step beside Robb, and Decker waits for us to join him, and all of us walk away, leaving the headmaster to handle Roald.

"I'm sorry," Decker mumbles as soon as we're away from the stream.

"For what?" Robb asks.

"If you hadn't shown up with the headmaster and her alpha when you did…" I swallow hard. I might not have been strong enough to handle Nia and all because I went for fancy demon tricks. All along, I should've continued to study and master those techniques even if my dad hasn't been teaching me. I still should've been training. All of those wasted weekends… time spent so unwisely…

"I couldn't stop her," Decker says. "Roald and I… Even Elliot."

"Elliot." Robb snorts. "He submitted to her."

"She only thinks I did." Elliot approaches from the east. From the west, Wyatt, Jett, and Mindy loom.

"You mean to say you didn't?" Robb asks as he, Decker, and I all stop.

The cat hangs her head.

"That's exactly what I mean," Elliot says.

"You two are the last of the rough crowd," I say even though my gaze falls to the bullies.

Wyatt halts a few feet away. "What happened to Roald?"

"Nia killed him," I say wearily.

"Her alpha took her away," Robb adds.

"If he is her alpha," I mumble.

Elliot grimaces. “My wolf could sense that I… If I wanted to, I could’ve submitted to her.”

“Roald fought her,” Robb says. “He wanted to be alpha. He tried… He wasn’t able to.”

“Roald had his flaws,” Wyatt says, “and he and I butted heads a lot. I didn’t agree with everything he did, and he didn’t with me, but despite everything, I kind of respected him.”

“Can’t you just say that you respected him?” Mindy complains. “He’s dead.”

“So is Gayle,” Decker utters. “I’m sorry. I wanted to free her, but Nia… She knew I wasn’t with her, and she… I would’ve been next. I would’ve freed Gayle, but we both would’ve died. I… I’m a coward.”

“No, you aren’t,” Jett argues. “Gayle would’ve been dead either way.”

“But my life—”

“Isn’t over.” Wyatt claps a hand on Decker’s shoulder.

“What’s all this?” I sulk. “You all are going to have a campfire and eat smores and sing Kumbaya while we hold hands?”

Wyatt eyes me. “What were you up to?”

“I sought out Nia. I wanted to save Gayle if I could. She sent fur and a canine to Robb! Did you know that Nia had Gayle? Why didn’t you do anything to save her!”

“We were respecting Gayle,” Wyatt snaps. “She wanted to try to do that, to infiltrate them or whatever. You tried to talk her out of it.”

“Because I didn’t want her to die!”

“We didn’t want her to die either,” Mindy cries.

“We didn’t know what happened until after it already happened,” Jett adds.

“We had a disagreement over who to talk to,” Decker says, glaring at Elliot.

“Telling the headmaster was the right call. Then I told them.”

“I called her alpha. If anyone can straighten her out, maybe he can,” Decker says. “Talking to him took longer than I wanted because I wanted to tell you guys right away too.”

“What’s done is done,” Wyatt says. “I mourn both Gayle and Roald, but I think… I think we can let bygones be bygones.”

“Of course you do,” I snap.

He hangs his head. “I still think a demon is stirring up hatred, but it’s not you.” Wyatt lifts his gaze to stare at me straight in the face. “I trust you with my life.”

“I don’t know if you should,” I tell him.

“Because you want to kill me?”

“No. Because that’s… I’m no alpha.”

“You can trust someone from another pack with your life,” he says.

“Oh, I know.”

“Especially from a sister pack.” Wyatt lowers his head.

“We’re all sorry,” Jett says. He holds out his hand. “I was… Having a half-demon in the pack… it wasn’t something that’s easy for me to accept, but I was wrong.”

“More than wrong. Gayle told us what you did before she went to join Nia.” Mindy bites her lower lip. “She should’ve told us right after you did that. You saved her life.”

“And she went and threw it away and for what?” I fling out my arms.

“She did it because she respected you, and she wanted her life to have meaning. She wanted to make up for her wrongs,” Wyatt explains.

“And now she’s dead.” Tears blur my vision.

“Nia’s gone,” Mindy says softly. “She’s the one we should’ve feared all along.”

I nod a few times and realize Jett still has his hand out. After a moment, I shake it.

Jett squeezes my hand. “I’m going to talk to some of the others in Ember pack. Maybe if they realize that Spark has your back entirely, they’ll start coming around and being a better pack.”

My eyes widen.

“Yes, we knew your pack basically abandoned you because of your mom,” Wyatt says bitterly, and I recall that his dad died when he was very young. All Wyatt has is his mom. “You made for easy picking, or so we thought.”

“She’s not,” Robb says proudly. “She’s as fierce as they come.”

“I couldn’t kill Nia. I fought her, but I…”

“Maybe it’s for the best that she’s alive. Maybe she can come around. We have,” Mindy says.

“Do you honestly think that?” I ask, doubt coloring my words.

Mindy wrinkles her nose. “No, but there’s hope for a better tomorrow, right?”

The cat huffs. “You all are stupid wolves. Why wait until tomorrow?”

“Listen, cat,” Wyatt growls.

“I think she means because it’s already tomorrow.” I point up to the lightening sky and force a smile. “Maybe today can be a bit better.”

We all go our separate ways then, and I lay my head on Robb’s shoulder as he steers me to his castle instead of the cave. Hope and peace are what I want, but most of all, I want him to survive, and I just don’t see how I’ll be able to have all three.

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Chapter 30

Robb

The moment I open my door, I stare at a package on my desk. I haven't been here in a long, long while, so I have no idea how long it's been there.

"Do you mind if I crash on your floor?" Bellanore asks through a yawn. "I'm exhaust—What's that?"

"Your guess is as good as mine."

I cross over and open it even though a sense of foreboding fills me. Inside is a potion of some kind.

"Who sent it to you?" Bellanore asks, coming over to look over my shoulder.

"There's no note, but…"

"A present from the necromancer?"

"Good bet."

"Are you going to take it?" she asks as she sits on the edge of my bed.

I sit beside her, the potion in my hand.

The cat jumps up onto my desk and stretches before licking her paw.

"Do you recognize it?" I ask the cat.

She barely looks over. "I'm a cat."

"Yeah, I know. So?"

"I have excellent night vision, but I can't see colors like you can. I can't tell what potions do what."

"Not even by smell?" I go to unstopper it.

The cat hisses and arches her back. "No! You shouldn't smell an unknown potion! You shouldn't smell an unknown anything!"

"Why not?"

"I know it's hard to believe, but not all cats are as smart as I am. I knew a cat named Jingles who once smelled a potion. It singed his whiskers right off his furry face! No thank you!" The cat rubs her whiskers.

"Maybe we can have a witch look at it," Bellanore suggests.

“What’s the point?” I ask glumly. “Death is all around us. It follows me.”

“That’s not true,” Bellanore protests. “If anything, it follows me!”

“Or me,” the cat interjects.

I rub my forehead. I have a migraine, and the full awareness and appreciation of both Gayle’s and Roald’s death haven’t sunk in just yet. I still can’t believe Nia killed them both. She’s a terror, but have we seen the last of her? Why is she so full of hate? Not that anything can ever excuse what she did, and even Roald had done wrong by me. In the end, forgiving Roald is possible. Forgiving Nia? Not so much.

“You aren’t going to take it,” Bellanore murmurs.

“Do you think I should?”

“I don’t know,” she says slowly. “If it is from Zaun… He wants you to kill my dad. You’ve been dragging your feet over it for how long? What if this potion allows Zaun to control you so you have no choice?”

“It might give you enough strength to take on any demon… even this Zaun,” the cat counters.

“I need Zaun to bring my pack back.”

The cat stops licking her paw. “We’re your pack.”

“Not exactly.”

The cat sighs and turns her back to me.

I hold up the potion. “I can try to steal time as much as I want, but it’s running out. It’s my life or your dad’s. There’s no choice, really. I should just kill myself now.”

“Don’t you dare say that!” Bellanore admonishes. She grabs my shoulders and forces me to look her in the eye. “Promise me you won’t do anything like that.”

I huff a sigh. “If I wanted to do that, I would’ve long before now. I never would’ve started to drink Mystic Twilight.” I eye the potion. “I asked Zaun for help, told him I needed something. This could be it.”

“This could be a trap,” she says. “You can’t trust demons.”

“Hear, hear!” the cat meows.

“I know, but, Bellanore…”

“I know,” she says quietly.

“None of this is easy.”

“I know. It’s not easy, and it’s not fair.” She hesitates. “I’m not even on speaking terms with my dad right now, but I can’t bring myself to want him to die.”

“There’s nothing wrong with wanting your dad alive.”

“Even if…”

“No matter what he’s done, he’s your dad.”

“But I have no idea what he’s done, what he’s capable of. My dad… He’s not a good person.”

“Most demons aren’t,” the cat interjects.

“Thank you, Captain Obvious,” I mutter.

“I would be a queen, not a captain,” the cat argues.

“Right. Sure.” I think about putting down the potion, but I don’t want to get up.

“We’ll think of something,” Bellanore says.

“We haven’t yet, and things around us are only getting worse. Werewolves and vampires… Students dying, killing each other… There are other concerns than just me and my curse.”

“I’ve tried talking to witches. Numerous ones. Maybe it’s time I start talking to demons.”

“Demons lie,” I warn.

“I can tell when they are.”

“They also talk. If word gets out to your dad about what you’re doing…”

“I don’t care,” she says stubbornly.

I tweak her nose. “Oink.”

“Are you calling me a pig?” she roars.

“Pigheaded.” I wink. “You can’t tell me it’s all right to call me half-pig and pigheaded, but I can’t call you that in return when it’s just as true for you as it is me.”

The look Bellanore gives me is hilarious, but I can barely crack a smile.

“I wasn’t strong enough to fight Nia,” she murmurs. “I wasn’t ready. I transformed into a snake, an elephant, a butterfly… I was wiped out after. I should’ve been trying to master everything that I can, not just the classes here. Everything. But I wasn’t.”

“Because you’ve been talking to witches and avoiding your dad.”

“I have nothing to show for this year.”

“You’re taking how many classes? Bellanore, you’re talented and smart and—”

“Nia killed Roald. She killed Gayle, and I couldn’t stop her.”

“You did stop her.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Her alpha is going to handle her.”

“If the Forge alpha even is her alpha anymore,” Bellanore mumbles.

I wince. She came to that conclusion, too, huh. Makes me all the more worried that we’re right.

“The future isn’t set,” I tell her.

“Maybe not, but the picture is becoming clearer and clearer with every passing day.

“Yes, I’ll die. You’ll die too.”

“Not for a long time.”

“I’ve already had a lot longer than I should’ve. I’m lucky to feel anything. At least, I thought I was.”

“Are you afraid?” She puts her hand on my knee, palm up.

I hold her hand. “Yes, I’m afraid,” I admit.

“I can take away your pain. When… When the time comes.”

“I want you to be there.”

“I’ll be there.”

“Promise me?”

“I promise, but, Robb…”

“Yeah?”

“Promise me that you’ll have no regrets.”

I stare into her glowing green eyes, and a part of me shatters. My heart. There are parts of it devoted to my parents, to my brother, to my pack… but there’s a part devoted to her.

We might not be able to be a pack because of the curse, but I’m still hers anyhow.

I cup her face and lean forward to kiss her so that I truly can die with no regrets when poof! An imp appears.

Bellanore jumps back away from me. “Draz?” she asks. She’s as shocked as I am.

The imp ignores her. “So, I hear you might be looking to kill my business partner. Is that true?”

I gape at the imp. “How did you hear about that? I haven’t told anyone—”

“I just might be willing to help if that’s the case,” the imp continues as if I hadn’t spoken. He eyes Bellanore. “And you should actually want to help us. If your father doesn’t die, the fate of the world will hang in the balance.”

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Moonstone Academy Year Three

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Chapter 1

Robb

"The fate of the world will hang in the balance."

The funny-looking imp that just appeared in my room isn't the first person to tell me this. He's three and a half feet tall with pointed ears and a button-shaped nose. His cheeks are so red he looks like he should be one of Santa's elves. His stomach is round, seriously round, and he's almost as wide as he is tall. His eyes take up half of his face. They're gold, the white part black. It makes him look both charming and adorable but also a bit creepy and strange.

"The fate of the world will hang in the balance," echoes in my mind, and just like that, I'm no longer in my room with Bellanore Shade, the love of my life and the daughter of a demon I'm supposed to kill; the imp; and a cat that I enjoy talking to and who enjoys insulting me.

I'm stuck in a nightmare of a memory of a day I will never forget for the rest of my short, accursed life.

I don't know where Rickard is. My brother wanted to play ball, and I had to go to the store first for Mom. She wanted to make a special meal with the deer Dad killed for dinner. Rickard didn't want to come with me, which is just as well because when he comes, he wants to talk to everyone there. He's a talker all right, but I'm not. I'm quiet and reserved. At least that's what Mom says. I'm not sure that's a compliment because Rickard takes after her. Mom makes friends wherever she goes. Werewolves, humans… doesn't matter what a person is. She'll talk your ear off if you let her.

Dad's more like me. A hunter. A fighter. We're the protectors, I guess. Sometimes, we'll sit on our front porch on the chairs we have there. He'll have a book. I might have a book or my phone or my tablet so I can do school work or just fool around on supes.com.

But after I put the groceries away, I can't find anyone in the house. I head outside and then start to walk around the block. It's really strange. No one is out and about.

I'm a part of the Aline pack, and we live on five streets in the town of

Mountain Grove. It's almost entirely run by the werewolves. There are a few other paranormal creatures who live here. No humans at all, which is why I don't hesitate to drop down to all fours and shift into my werewolf.

That's when I smell blood.

It leads me across the street, where I find the door ajar. Inside, I find dead werewolves. The wounds make me think of a blade of some kind instead of claws. They were clearly murdered.

With dawning horror, I realize that every house that has cars in the driveaway has a household of dead werewolves inside.

But I can smell blood, a lot more of it, to the north where there's a forest. I bound over there, and that's when I can smell something else.

Lavender and vanilla.

My mom's scent.

I come across her near the edge of the forest. She reaches up toward my face. She's a human, her body covered in blood, and I change back to human so I can hold her. Her hand never does touch my cheek because she dies in my arm.

Who did this?

Why?

My head tilts back, and I haven't even registered that I shifted my head back to my wolf until I hear the desperate howl of the wolf.

My wolf.

I'm the one howling.

Next to Mom is Dad. He's dead too, and just over there is Rickard. He's also gone.

I'm gone, too, gone out of my mind, and I race past the other werewolves, all dead, their blood watering the grass beneath. The deeper into the forest I go, the more the werewolves are in their wolves form instead of humans.

It's as if some had been ambushed.

Up ahead, I can hear fighting and some bits of a troubling conversation.

"You all will die!" someone says.

I don't recognize the voice.

"Why are you doing this?"

Devel is the one to ask that. He's a few years older than I am.

Where are they?

I keep racing along, careful not to step on anyone, hating that there's no one moving, no wounded, but the answer makes me stop in my tracks.

"Zaun will be so pleased! The demon will give me anything I want once all of you are dead!"

"You won't…" Devel can't finish his statement, his words coming off with a strangled gasp.

There's some more fighting, and I burst past a line of trees to a slight clearing filled with the rest of my packmates. It certainly seems like they're

all dead.

There's only one person standing. A drow. A demonic elf. Long white hair. White bushy eyebrows above red eyes. A cleft chin. Pointed ears. Strange armor. Twin daggers with dull blue jewels encrusted in the hilts. The blades are all covered in blood.

"Come, boy. You're the last one." The drow grins. "How does it feel knowing that your alpha made a pact with me?"

I think back to the conversation I overheard one day, a conversation my alpha asked me to forget, a conversation I almost had forgotten. Collin hadn't used his influence as my alpha to get me to forget, but still, I put it out of my mind.

Until now.

"You're… You're Dural," I say slowly. I'm not even sure when I turned back to my human self. I can barely process what is happening. I'm the last Aline? How is that possible? My mom, my dad… Rickard… my friends… neighbors… my pack…

"Yes. Collin, your alpha—your dead *alpha—made a deal with me."*

"And you double-crossed him!" I growl, half of me already back into my wolf. "To gain favor with a demon who will be just as likely to double-cross you!"

The drow flicks his wrists, and blood splatter flies off his daggers. "Come on, boy. Let's get this done and over with already. My daggers want a bit more blood."

"I don't think so, and you won't kill me. I, Robb Aline, will be the one to kill you!"

I let out a howl, and I race toward the drow. He's killed us for a demon. He hunted us down and betrayed us all.

He'll pay for this.

It's personal.

And personal means he won't die by my hand, by my claws.

No, he'll die by his own weapons, the very weapons he seems to love.

My wolf allows me to reach the drow in seconds. He tries to attack me, slicing the air with his daggers, but I go down low, ramming against his legs. He stumbles, and I race on past him. Dural turns to face me, and this time, he's ready for me, and the one dagger cuts above along and down my left eye, not deep enough to put out my eye or damage it, but the wound gushes blood. I can only see red through that eye, but that doesn't matter. I'm already seeing red.

With a howl, I dart forward. The wound burns unnaturally. There must be some magic enhancing the blade, but I don't stop. I slam into Dural's legs. As soon as I strike him, I turn into a human and grab his legs, lifting them. He slams down hard onto the ground, and I scramble on top of him, sitting on his chest. One of my feet slams onto his wrist. I go to do the same with the other one, but he isn't holding the dagger in the other hand. He

must've dropped it.

The drow won't release the other dagger, and I move my foot just enough to slam his wrist down again and again. The drow is already injured. I hadn't noticed that at first, and the sight of his wounds make me proud. He might've killed the other Alines, but we fought back and hard.

One more slam of his wrist against the ground and the dagger comes out of his hand. It's just out of reach, and I have to get up to get it, hopping up, having my knee on his chest to try to pin him in place, but that doesn't work. I'm not heavy enough to keep him there, and he starts to get up, but I grab the dagger. The drow looms over me, and before I can think, before he can react, I slice him from his belly up to his chest.

Dural gapes at me and then looks down at the wound. I shove him back, and he staggers. Another slice deepens the hole, especially along his chest.

He staggers back another step, and I knock him down to the ground. With both hands, I grip the dagger high above my head, and I slam it down onto his chest. It hits bone, but I slide forward until it forces the blade through the space between the ribs. I don't know if the blade is long enough to reach his heart, but I hope so. I yank back the blade. The sight of it covered in blood sickens me, and I toss it away and stand, looming over the dying drow.

"The last Aline… Robb Aline…"

The drow stares at me with his soulless red eyes even as blood gushes from the wound in his chest. He only has heartbeats to live yet until he'll bleed out, but the words come out of him with an enchanted quality that seems to make everything else around me go still.

"You will not be able to survive. You are hereby cursed."

A chilling wind lifts my hair from my forehead, and I shiver.

Before I can do anything, the drow continues, his words mystical and strange. "You will be a lone wolf until the day you die. Your pack is Aline and Aline alone. You, Robb Aline, are doomed to die alone, a most… painful death…"

With that, the drow grins. Blood coats his sharpened teeth as he laughs. The sound is mirthless. Red lifeforce dribbles down his chin and falls onto his chest, onto his long, straight white strands. His skin is normally a dark gray color, and it pales slightly. Then, he just stops bleeding.

I can't move. At first, I can't budge an inch. Then, that bizarre chilling wind leaves, and I am myself again. The curse… I wouldn't have been able to move my hand to slice his throat or to rip out his silver tongue. Once he started the curse, I became spellbound.

"Well, well, well, what happened here?" a voice echoes despite us being out of doors. The voice is every bit as chilling as the wind from the curse.

I turn and gape at the speaker. My heart sinks as I realize he's a demon. A huge body, red skin, fires burning in his eyes… His body radiates

strength and destruction, and I jerk back from the fallen drow.

This must be Zaun.

The demon Dural so desperately wanted to impress by killing the entire Aline pack.

A demon who will not be at all happy that the drow is now dead because he failed at the task.

I swallow hard. "What… What does it look like?" I ask.

Zaun laughs. "A werewolf pup still alive, and Dural? Dural? You disappoint me."

I do my best to suppress a shudder. Dural hadn't lied. Zaun really did want the pack killed, but why?

The demon inhales deeply. "Ah, the scent of freshly shed blood. It's an intoxicating aroma, don't you think?"

"No," I say blankly. "What are you? A vampire?"

He bursts out laughing and then points a long finger at me. "Do be careful to watch your words. You're cursed, boy, and you're going to die."

I stiffen. "How do you know I'm cursed?"

"Foolish boys. Your glowing eyes for one. Two, I saw what you did. I heard what Dural said. I've been here much longer than you realize, but…"

I stand still and close my eyes, waiting for him to strike me down, for this madness to end.

Only nothing happens.

My eyes crack open. The demon is circling around me.

"You don't have to die," Zaun says. "Make a deal with me."

"You aren't going to get my soul."

"That's debatable. You just killed someone. You aren't exactly destined for heaven, my boy."

"I'm not your boy!"

Zaun lifts his bushy eyebrows. "You aren't exactly anyone's right now. Isn't that the whole problem? Yes, yes, it is, and I'm offering you a way out, so how about you treat me with the respect I deserve?"

"You're the reason why my family, why my pack is dead. Excuse me if my lack of respect is evident."

Zaun looms larger somehow despite not moving toward me. "The terms are simple, and no, I won't lay claim to your soul, but you might one day wish I had. All I ask of you is to kill Ronath."

"Who?"

"A particular demon."

"You want me to kill a demon," I repeat dully. "How will that help me?"

"You kill Ronath, and I will resurrect your pack. All of them, not just your family. The Alines will rise once more."

"You can't do what you say," I grumble. Already, I can feel a heavy, oppressive weight on my chest. It's almost impossible to breathe.

Grief? Guilt? The curse already taking a hold on me? I can't say.

"Ah, ye of little faith." The demon smirks at me. "I am not just any demon. I'm a necromancer. I can bring your family and pack back with their minds, with their bodies, with their souls. It will be as if they never died at all. Wouldn't that be just perfect? Exactly what you want, isn't it?"

It is. He knows it is, but to kill a demon? How can I do that? I'm not sure I'll be able to handle that kind of a battle. Besides, I don't know if I can trust Zaun. He's indirectly the reason why my pack is dead.

He circles around me, grinning the entire time. His stare is so strong and unsettling that it feels as if he can read my mind and know my thoughts. Is he feeding off my despair?

"Do as I say," Zaun murmurs, "and you can be saved. Kill Ronath. Just kill one demon. What would be so terrible about that? You'll be doing the world a favor. Go ahead and kill Ronath, and you won't have to die."

"Kill a demon? The curse—"

"I don't want excuses. I want results." Zaun smiles at me, and I almost miss the smirk. The smile is beyond creepy, and I'm chilled straight to the bone. "That curse will doom you to an early, painful grave, but you can be saved yet. There's only one way you can live, and that's if I bring back your pack. Do your part, and I'll do mine. Who knows? The fate of the world will hang in the balance."

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Chapter 2

Bellanore

“Robb…” I murmur.

“Yeah?”

“Promise me that you’ll have no regrets.”

He stares into my eyes, and I stare right back into his sky blue orbs. The scar on his left eyelid stands out more than normal because his skin is pale. He's dying. We can't deny it any longer, but in his eyes, I can see so much there that I couldn't before.

I can see how much he cares for me.

I can see how much he loves me.

And I hope he knows how much I love him in return.

If only he wasn’t cursed! I would leave Ember pack in a heartbeat to form a pack with Robb. Yes, we’re young. Yes, it’s not easy to leave a pack. I don’t care. I would’ve done it.

Anything to save him.

He cups my face and leans forward to kiss me when poof! An imp appears.

I jump back away from Robb. “Draz?” I ask, shocked. Why is a business associate of my dad’s here? Former associate, I think.

The imp ignores me. “So, I hear you might be looking to kill my business partner. Is that true?”

Robb gapes at the imp. “How did you hear about that? I haven’t told anyone—”

“I just might be willing to help if that’s the case,” the imp continues as if Robb hadn’t spoken. Draz eyes me. “And you should actually want to help us. If your father doesn’t die, the fate of the world will hang in the balance.”

I gape at the imp. Robb just sits there on the edge of his bed, seemingly lost in his thoughts, but I have to stand. Everything seems to be happening far too quickly now. First, everything with Gayle and Roald.

Robb transferred to Moonstone Academy a few months into year one last year. A group of students who were a bit rougher than most

basically adopted him—Roald Jagger, Decker Winds, Elliot Snowblood, and Nia Forge. There were issues. Roald fancied himself able to leave his pack and tried to form a new one with the others.

Nia, though, is the one with that potential inside of her. She caused all kinds of problems for the werewolves and provoked a lot of fights with the vampires from the nearby vampire academy, Blood Haven. She tried to give students Mystic Twilight, a mystical drink that gives us great power and strength but, if abused, can cause some serious health problems.

Just ask Robb. He's had to take some of the potion for a long while to help combat the curse. His entire pack has been killed, and a demon named Zaun will resurrect Robb's pack if Robb will kill a demon named Ronath.

My dad.

Back to Nia. After I foiled her Mystic Twilight plan, she concocted poisons for the claws and some teeth of werewolves. She's insane.

And then, there's the Spark pack. My mom belongs to the Ember pack, and the Spark pack is an offshoot. I guess after the events earlier, they're no longer my bullies, but for a while, I was harassed by Wyatt, Jett, Gayle, and Mindy. They didn't like the idea of a demonic werewolf attending the academy.

But I saved Gayle from that attack on the vampires when the werewolves had been armed with poisonous claws. Around that time, Roald and the others started to turn against Robb, and Gayle wanted to infiltrate them. I'm not even sure if Gayle understood when I told her that Decker wasn't for the others either. He was our spy already, but Gayle went ahead.

And Nia killed her.

I went after Nia. Roald went after Nia. She almost bested me, and she killed Roald.

All this happened not even an hour ago.

And now this? Draz saying that I should want to help Robb and him? That my dad needs to die because of the fate of the world? I mean, I know my dad isn't the best of people. He's a demon, after all, and I'm not exactly the happiest right now. Lately, he's been terrible to me, pushing me much too hard with my demonic abilities. I didn't mean to, but my attempts to get around his teaching efforts meant that I killed a hellhound. I haven't told anyone about that.

This isn't the first time that Draz's come to see me. Before, he told me not to look into what my dad is up to. I met Draz because Dad wanted to use me as a makeshift lie detector. I can tell if someone's being truthful and sense emotions. My dad can't. It irks him that I can do something he can't.

It had been the first time he ever brought me around for something

business-related. I lied and told Dad that Draz was telling the truth when he said he needed more time to gather whatever item Dad wanted him to procure.

Afterward was when Draz warned me to stay out of Dad's business. He claimed he was looking out for me.

"Draz, now isn't the time for you to be vague," I demand. "You tell me everything that my dad is up to."

The imp nods several times.

"And no teleporting anywhere until you're done," I add.

Draz waves his hand, and he's magically human-sized. "Your dad has been very busy for some time now."

"Doing what?" I'm ready to strangle the imp.

"He's been driven by greed. His desire for wealth has transformed into his being driven by…"

Without warning, green foam starts to fizzle out of Draz's mouth. His body begins to shake, and he trembles until he falls down.

Robb jerks to his feet and slides down beside Draz. "He's dead."

"What? How?" I check for Draz's pulse, but Robb's right.

"What caused him to die?" Robb asks.

"Obviously, Dad put some kind of hex on his partners so they would wind up dead if they were to speak out against him or to divulge secrets." I sit back on my heels and rub the back of my neck. "Draz just wanted to help us, and now look at him. Death really does follow us."

"It's not even as if he said anything at all useful," Robb says.

"That's the point of a hex, to prevent anything from happening." I grimace.

"What are we going to do with his body?" Robb asks.

"Ah… that's a good question."

A question that I don't have an answer for.

"Should we just tell the headmaster what happened?" Robb suggests.

"No. I don't want to put him on Dad's radar."

"You don't trust good ole Headmaster Virgil, huh?"

"Not really. Do you?" I ask.

"I think it's a good thing that he sent Nia away."

"Yeah, sent her into the hands of an alpha who might not have her under his control. Did you see the way she bristled and flinched when she walked by him? What if he's abusive? That would explain why she wanted out of her pack."

"There's no way to know for now what's going on with her." Robb shrugs. "For now, it has to be out of sight, out of mind."

"I guess. Which brings us back to Draz." I grimace. "I don't know if he has any family. I mean, he should go back to them, right?"

“That would be ideal, yes. Do you have any way to find out where his family is?”

“I can try, but I’m still a bit fatigued after the whole fight with Nia.”

“You can try in the morning,” Robb suggests.

“Do you honestly think I can sleep here with a dead body?”

“You can sleep in your room, in your bed,” he points out.

“I’m not leaving you.”

“Then you have no choice.”

“No choice?”

“But to sleep here with a dead body.”

“I suppose,” I mumble.

“You can have my bed,” he offers.

“No. You need it.”

“I don’t need it.”

“You two talk too much,” the cat meows. “How is anyone able to get any sleep around here?”

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Chapter 3

Robb

It's not easy to sleep and not just because of Draz's dead body. Although I've slept alongside Bellanore before, this just feels different. The other occasions had all been in the cave, but being in my room makes it feel more intimate somehow, even though she's in my desk chair. No matter how many times I offered her my bed, she refused to take it. There's only the one chair, or else I would've slept in that and left the bed empty if she continued to be stubborn. If not for Draz, I would have slept on the floor. The students all live in rooms in castles, but our rooms aren't huge enough for me to be willing to sleep on the floor next to the body.

The light of the midday sun is what wakes me. I'm still exhausted, and the first thing I see when I open my eyes is the potion Zaun left for me. At least I assume it's from the necromancer. I don't know if I can trust him. When Dural cursed me, I thought I might only have a few weeks, a month at the most. I hadn't known enough about how the body works for a werewolf without a pack. Lone wolves go insane first. They're unable to survive without their wolf. When their wolves die, they die. We're connected just as we're connected to our packs.

Maybe it’s because of the curse or maybe even the agreement that Zaun and I have, but it’s amazing to think that it’s been almost two years since I killed the drow. I should’ve been dead long before now. How could Zaun have ever thought it possible that a lone wolf could be strong enough to kill a demon?

Despite the allure of having my pack with me, I haven’t really considered actually going through with killing Ronath. Yes, I learned that he had a child attending Moonstone Academy. That’s why I enrolled here, but once I came here, I never found out which student was his. I only learned by accident, when Zaun came to see me when Bellanore was there, and he mentioned that time was running out, that I needed to hurry up and kill Ronath.

To say that Bellanore, my girlfriend at the time, was furious and confused is an understatement, and it took a long time for our

relationship to get back on track. I think everything is settled between us now, though. Maybe I should just tell her how I feel before my emotions start to turn off again.

The Mystic Twilight. Just thinking about it makes my heart start to palpate. It had to have helped me last this long, but my heart is weaker now. I'm closer to death because of the abuse, and I have no one to blame but myself.

Bellanore shifts and then blinks. She rolls her neck from side to side and sits up. "Robb, how did you sleep?"

"About as well as you did by the looks of it."

She grimaces. "I slept terribly."

"I tried to give you the bed."

"Not because of the chair."

"Nightmares?"

Bellanore nods, and her gaze falls on Draz. "Let me see if I can find his parents."

And she disappears, teleporting away.

Shaking my head, I climb out of bed and head over to the imp's body. I don't want to rile through his pockets, but I find his wallet. His driver's license lists an address. It's a decent distance away, upper Pennsylvania, I think. Moonstone's in Virginia.

I call Bellanore. She answers right away.

"Where did you go?" I ask.

"I thought I would—"

"Making any progress?"

"No."

"You left too quickly."

She sighs. "I guess I can be a bit impulsive at times."

"Just a bit."

~

Two hours later, we went to Draz's house, found no signs of a family anywhere, and we end up burying him in the backyard of his house. What else can we do?

We head back to my room and take turns washing up, Bellanore first. When I return to my room from the bathroom, there's food waiting for me on the desk.

"Eat up," she says.

"Did you?"

She nods.

I pick at it, which earns a glare, so I force myself to eat. The bacon goes down smoothly, but I'm not really in the mood for pancakes. I'm not about to complain, though. Bellanore got me food, and I

appreciate that.

“How are you feeling now?” she asks.

I choke down a bite of the pancake. “Hate.”

“Hate?”

“I hate Collin.”

“Who’s Collin?”

“You shouldn’t hate anyone,” the cat meows.

“You shouldn’t judge anyone,” I counter.

The cat sniffs and jumps from the windowsill to my bed and then again to Bellanore's lap, where she's sitting on my desk chair. Bellanore strokes the cat, who purrs contently.

“Do you have a name?” Bellanore asks.

“Yes.”

“Don’t bother to ask for it,” I say.

The cat gives a *who, me?* look that's ridiculous and adorable.

Bellanore shrugs. “Who’s Collin?” she asks me again.

“The alpha of the Alines.”

Bellanore purses her lips. “You’re the alpha.”

“Just because he’s dead and I’m alive? Eh, I guess, but I don’t feel like an alpha.”

“You’re one,” Bellanore assures me. “Why do you hate him?

"He made a deal with Dural. I don't know why or for what, and honestly, that doesn't matter. The drow betrayed Collin and killed the rest of them. That's unforgivable."

“You blame Collin.”

“Of course I do. And Dural and Zaun because Dural killed in his name.”

“That’s a lot of hate,” Bellanore murmurs.

“I’m not just a bundle of hate,” I assure her. “I taught my brother how to ride a bike.”

“Yeah?”

I nod, grinning. "I used to ride my bike everywhere. My parents always said that I wouldn't get a car until after I graduated from an academy, so I didn't see the need to get a driver's license right at sixteen. What would be the point? We didn't have a car for me to drive, so I rode my bike everywhere. But Rickard? He didn't ride, so I had to walk instead. I hated it."

“That’s why you taught him.”

“Yes, but almost right away, Rickard fell and scraped his knee badly. He healed, of course, but Rickard… He didn’t handle pain well.” I grimace and push through to get to the better part of the story. “Rickard was ready to give up, but I wouldn’t let him, so I bought him a skateboard. I figured that if he could ride that, he could just do that while I had my bike.”

“It didn’t work,” she guesses.

"Not at all." I laugh. "I had to use the skateboard to ride alongside Rickard on the bike so he could learn. He must've fallen on me a hundred times, and I must've fallen off the skateboard a hundred times myself."

“How were you falling off it that many times?” she asks.

“Easy.” I wink at her. “I was trying to do all kinds of fancy tricks and jump over stuff and all of that.”

“Did he master riding a bike before you mastered the skateboard?”

“Basically, but I can do a flip. Well, I nailed it a grand total of one time, but still, that has to count for something, right?”

“So you two rode your bikes a lot?”

“Yeah, there was a dirt trail not too far from our house. We used to do races. We would ride to school and to the library. Rickard used to take guitar lessons.”

“Oh, wow. Did you learn how to play an instrument?”

“Does the recorder count?”

“Oh, man.” Bellanore giggles. “No, sorry.”

“You?”

“How do you think I know that the recorder doesn’t count?”

I laugh. “I used to help my mom cook all the time. Meals. Not dessert. I didn’t like baking.”

“There’s no difference,” she protests.

“There’s a world of difference. Baking is… I don’t know. There’s a lot more flair to meals.”

“Says you.” She grimaces.

Uh oh. I think you insulted her.

“How?” I protest.

“I bake,” Bellanore says.

“You do? Since when?”

“Since forever.” She laughs, her eyes shining. “You don’t know every detail about me.”

“I’ll cook you dinner one of these nights if you bake dessert.”

“It’s a date,” she says softly.

Much happier now, I finish the rest of my plate.

Bellanore stops stroking the cat and brings a hand up near her mouth. “My mom would tell me bedtime stories at night. She made up each one on the spot. Once, I talked to a random guy while I was waiting outside for Mom to be done banking. Mom came out, and she practically chased the guy away. Only after she took me home did she explain that she sensed something off about him.”

“Was she right?”

Bellanore nods.

“Moms are never wrong,” the cat meows. “Moms are magic.”

“You plan on being a mom one day, don’t you?” I ask the cat dryly.

“Of course!”

“The guy turned out to be a half-cyclops, half-fairy. The fairy part allowed him to change his appearance. And we found out on supes.com that night that HEX Unite was trying to track him down because he was wanted for murder.”

“Oh, wow. HEX Unite isn’t usually so public with their targets.”

“Considering he was killing both paranormal creatures *and* humans, they wanted him out of the picture pronto. Mom’s intuition was right.”

“Why didn’t you realize he was bad news? What did you two talk about anyhow?”

“I can’t remember the conversation now, and I think my mom thought I couldn’t recognize evil because of being too close to it.”

“Because you’re half-demon?”

"Something like that. Anyhow, that night, she told me a story about a princess who met a beautiful fairy who turned out to be a wicked enchantress who locked the fairy away for hundreds of years.

You know how demons can turn red when they’re really angry? Not just their eyes but their entire bodies?”

I nod.

“The first time I saw Dad do that, I was terrified. Dad wanted me to do it so I would realize it was something normal that I can do, but I was too scared to try. You want to know what my mom did? She bought herself a she-devil costume from a human Halloween shop so that I wouldn’t have to do it alone.”

“But you can only do it when you’re angry. How did that help?”

“Demons tend to have a lot of anger even when there’s no reason for it, so it wasn’t as hard as you would think.”

“It sounds like she really cared about keeping you safe.”

“Yes, she did.” Bellanore grimaces.

“What changed?” I venture.

“I embraced my demon side too much. Dad would push me to train, to learn more, do more, and Mom hated it. She started to draw away, and she never came back around. I mean, if I went up to her right now, I bet she wouldn’t look me in the eye.”

“That’s a shame,” I declare.

“You have pretty eyes.”

“Thank you, cat.”

“The cat’s not wrong,” I agree.

The cat hisses at me. “Would it be so hard to just say I agree with the cat?”

“Yes,” I tease.

The cat swats a paw toward me.

“Didn’t Wyatt and the others say that they’re going to talk to Ember pack?” I ask gently.

“Yes, but who knows if they’re serious for one thing. For another, who knows when they’ll do it.”

“We need to learn everything we can about your dad,” I say urgently. “Maybe you should talk to her.”

“She won’t know anything about his whereabouts or his business,” she protests.

“You should talk to her anyhow. A girl needs her mother.”

“I’m not a girl anymore,” she says dryly.

“You still need her.”

After a moment, Bellanore nods. “I do need her, but I don’t know if she wants me as her daughter anymore.”

“She doesn’t have a choice in the matter.”

“By blood, no, but her heart…”

“Trust me, Bellanore. You can reach her. You can have her back in your life again. You’ll need to forgive her, and she needs… I don’t know why she pushed you aside, but… I think you two can make it work.”

“I want that,” she murmurs. “I really do.”

“If you think it’s worth a try, then go for it.”

“All right.” She beams. “I’ll try. Thank you.”

“Anything for you, Bellanore. Anything.”

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Chapter 4

Bellanore

Robb's words melt my heart, but when I leave him, it's not to do what I said. I don't go off to see my mom.

Instead, I'm off to see my dad.

He's in the house we lived in before I started to train at the academy, on his tablet, sitting at the dining room table. It looks so ordinary, so perfectly human almost, and I don't know how to react.

Dad doesn't. React, that is. He keeps his gaze on his tablet even though he has to realize he's not alone. I'm right by the door, in the living room. It's all open here, the living room and dining room forming one massive room, and I take a moment to glance around.

The house is as it was the last time I was here. Same furniture, same paint on the walls… It's a house, not a home, and a wave of loneliness washes over me. Mom's never come here, and it feels like the place is missing so much more than just pictures and paintings.

It's missing love.

Yes, Dad and I have memories here, good ones even. In the backyard, Dad used to set out traps to snare rabbits. Then, he would set them free and time me as my wolf to hunt them. We would then eat the rabbits for dinner in a stew.

He accepted that I'm not just a demon, that I have a wolf inside me. Why couldn't Mom do the same? Why did she have to abandon me? Did I do something wrong? I just don't understand how she could spend my early years with Dad, loving him, loving the both of us, and then leaving us.

Dad and I never talked about why Mom left. He just told me one day that she wouldn't be returning home. I wanted to ask, but he seemed sad.

Or maybe I just wanted him to be sad. While he hasn't moved on at all and found another woman, and as far as I know, they're still married, I never saw Dad cry. He hardly ever talks about her, and I don't know if he misses her.

Maybe he doesn't miss me now that I'm at the academy, now that

we fought.

But we had arguments before, and we worked things out.

Will he let me back in, though? Do I want to take that risk? Yes, I want to know what he's up to. Draz died trying to tell me.

Draz died.

He had been hexed.

Draz wasn't stupid. He was careful. When he tried to warn me before to not look into Dad's business, he teleported away because he had become afraid.

Draz hadn't known he was hexed. Otherwise, he would have found a way around the hex to tell me more about my dad.

Dad is vindictive and devious. He's cunning and every bit a demon through and through.

Yes, I have many good memories with the man, but that doesn't make him a good person. Maybe Robb's right. Maybe it isn't a contest as to who should live or who should die.

Maybe Dad is the one who should go.

But then there's Zaun. His wanting Dad out of the way might make Zaun even more powerful. No, it definitely will. An entire pack of werewolves will be loyal to him for bringing them back to life. They won't be zombies. They'll willingly follow him to the point that they might even have a demon for an alpha.

Killing Dad might make Zaun an even worse and far greater enemy.

My head is swimming, and I don't know if I can handle this, if I can go through with trying to leverage my relationship with Dad to see if I can determine whether or not to help my boyfriend kill him. It's so twisted and wrong on so many levels.

But Robb didn't ask for this. He killed Dural to avenge the murder of his pack. The drow cursed him to die as a lone wolf. Who wouldn't be tempted by a demon who promises to return your loved ones so you can live the rest of your life until you die of old age with family and friends by your side?

Which makes me love Robb all the more. He never once acted against my dad. I know Robb's looked into Dad, into his business, tried to contact business partners, but he never asked me for any details about what abilities my Dad has, what he doesn't. Robb doesn't want to kill my dad and not just because Ronath is my dad.

Robb doesn't want to kill again.

And I get that. I so understand that. Robb shouldn't feel guilty for killing Dural even though it put him in this terrible predicament. But my killing the hellhound? Yes, it had been an accident and unintentional, but I still feel guilty about that, and I always will. Killing someone changes a person. It destroys a part of your soul. It

doesn't make your soul black. No, a part of your soul dies when you kill, and if enough parts of your soul die, you become darker, eviler…

I wonder if serial killers, even the human ones, partially turn into demons as a result of their vile acts.

“Considering you have so much wealth, I’m surprised you didn’t sell this place and buy a castle. Or an entire state.” I smirk as I pull out the chair to his right and sit down.

Dad slowly lowers the tablet and eyes me without blinking. “What do you want, Bellanore?”

I deliberately fold my hands together on the table and lean toward him. "It's simple, really. I've come to you because I've come to realize that I need your help. I want to train."

“Is that so? You want to train? Then train.” He lifts his tablet again.

I reach over and put my hand on the screen. “I want you to train me.”

“Why?” He doesn’t look at me. He’s barely acknowledged my existence, and I hate that it bothers me so much. Despite everything, I still want his approval. I know it’s the nature of a child to want her dad’s approval, but when that dad doesn’t have the child’s best interests at heart…

What is it Dad wants? Out of life? Out of me?

Did Dural ever procure that item for Dad? Is that related to his immense wealth?

“Bellanore, if you’ve come to waste my time,” he says with a sigh, “might I suggest that you leave?”

“I’m not leaving. Dad, there was a fight at school.”

“There’s been more than a few from what I hear.”

“You know about the fights?”

“Yes. The various poisons used, all of it.”

I narrow my eyes. “And you never thought to check and see if I was involved, if I was hurt?”

He barely looks at me. “You seem fine.”

"Fine?" I bark a bitter laugh and stand, my legs forcing the chair back, its legs scraping against the wooden floor. "The fight I'm talking about wasn't werewolf on vampire. No, I fought against a werewolf and—"

“It should have been an easy battle for you. Did you win?”

“No,” I admit, “but I did turn into a snake and an elephant, and—”

“An elephant against a wolf?”

“Yes,” I say, hating his reproachful tone. “I thought—”

“You wore yourself out, didn’t you? You were cocky, arrogant, and you didn’t think at all.”

“I did think,” I protest. “We were by a stream and—”

“Had you ever turned into an elephant before?”

“No, but—”

“Have you seen an elephant in real life before?”

“No, but—”

“‘No, but,’” he mocks. “Always with the excuses! Do you think you can just shift into animals or persons, or can you transform yourself into anything you wish?”

“I… I think…”

“You haven’t tried. In all this time that I wasn’t training you, you grew lax and lazy, and you come here now claiming to want my help? Why should I bother when you won’t take the time to train yourself? It’s become very clear to me the path to the future, Bellanore, and I don’t see a place for you in it.”

A chill runs down my spine, and my jaw drops. Is that a threat? Is he threatening me, or am I reading into it?

Or maybe I’m just hoping that I’m reading into it.

“Dad, I—”

“For all I know, Bellanore, this battle didn’t happen, and you’re just lying to me to try to pretend that you want to train. You’re manipulating me, and you came here for another reason. Of that, I’m certain.”

“I’m not lying—”

“There are many ways to lie, and I hope for your sake that you are lying because turning into various animals just because you can with no game plan, with no knowledge of those creatures… What snake did you turn into?”

I can’t say because I don’t know. For the most part, in zoolingualism class, we’ve mostly learned to communicate with mammals, not so much reptiles.

“Did you at least turn into a rattlesnake? A cobra? A snake that could kill a person with one bite?”

I lower my head. I did bite Nia, but other than wounding her, any poison didn’t affect her. Because of werewolf healing? Or because I didn’t have any poison?

“It’s one thing to change your shape, but it’s another to become that animal, to own that animal. You mentioned a stream.”

My gaze meets his cold stare. He was listening more than I thought he was.

"Could you even suck up the water on your first try?" he continues. "Do you know how to walk like an elephant, how to fight like one? You can use your ability to blend into your environment. Sometimes, it is better to hide than to fight."

“I survived,” I spit out.

“And your foe, is he or she dead?”

“Alive.”

“Why?”

“I’m here to ask you to train me—”

“You’re lying. If you truly wanted me to train you, you would have returned long before now.” He stands. “Bellanore… Maybe I’m wrong. Maybe you can one day stand beside me. I hope that will be the case, but in order for that to happen, you are going to have to learn for yourself what you can and cannot do. Otherwise, you are going to have to sink or swim on your own.”

He grips my chin. It’s not hard, but it’s a firm grip, and I stare up at him, hoping I don’t look intimidated even though I am.

“If I won’t accept you back,” he says calmly, as if he’s talking about something mundane the weather, “then you will sink.”

“I not only know how to swim,” I inform him, grabbing his wrist. “I know how to dive.”

Dad grins then, the grin I remember, the one that he used to give me when he was pleased with me, the kind from when Ellamaria, my best friend, was right in saying that my dad was my favorite parent.

“Is that so? Do it, Bellanore. Be my daughter. Despite what you may think, I’ve never lost faith in you, so why have you lost faith in me? I offered to give you anything you wanted, but you insulted me. You injured me.”

“Dad… you want me to stand beside you. Stand beside you as far as what?” I ask.

Now, his grin turns positively evil, his eyes shining red like fire. “You aren’t ready to know what all I have planned, but if you wish to join me, you must be ready.”

“Ready for what?”

“For anything.”

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Chapter 5

Robb

The cat jumps over to me as soon as Bellanore teleports away. “She’s growing on me.”

“She has a way of getting under your skin in a good way.”

“Yeah. She just wants what’s best for you.”

“Unfortunately, what’s best for me would mean my killing her dad so…”

“Your life is messed up.”

“It’s not my fault!”

“All I hear is you going on and on and complaining. ‘Woe is me. I’m a wolf with a curse.’“

“Please don’t try to howl.”

“Why not?" The cat blinks her eyes at me. She's way too dark-furred for me to think her anything close to innocent.

“You sound like you’re dying.”

“You would know.”

“Ouch. Remind me not to make you angry because you’re cruel as it is.”

“Meow. I’m not cruel. I tell it like it is,” the cat meows.

“You know…” I say slowly.

“I know what?”

“I think…” I swallow hard.

“I’m not going to sit around all day. I have things to do, places to be.”

“What do you have to do?” I ask dryly. “Where do you have to be?”

“That windowsill looks lonely,” the cat says.

“The windowsill doesn’t look lonely,” I scoff.

“It does! It’s way too warm from the heat of the sunlight baking it!”

As if to prove her point, the cat leaps from the desk to my bed and then jumps onto the windowsill. She curls up into a ball then stretches out and curls up again.

“Better?” I ask wryly.

“Still have more to do on my list.”

“Such as?”

“Nap. Eat. Annoy you. Nap. Eat again. Nap and—”

“I get the picture.”

“But if you want to talk and actually use your words…” The cat waves a paw at me as if to gesture go ahead.

She really spent way too much time with that witch. It’s as if she’s a miniature, furry teenager with lots of sass and attitude.

“You aren’t the first cat I ever saw,” I blurt out.

“Wow. Now that’s a big surprise.”

My nostrils flare. “I’m talking about with my brother.”

“He’s dead, right?”

“Yes,” I grumble.

“I’m just trying to keep everything straight. I’m not an elephant.”

“Is it true? That an elephant will never forget?”

"Have you seen the size of their heads? Their brains are massive! But elephants don't like to talk to anyone but elephants, so it can't be proven or disproven. Anyhow, what about your brother and a cat? Did you have a cat growing up in your house?"

“No, but there was a cat that Rickard liked. He would sometimes go for walks by himself after dinner, and I saw him stealing food to take with him. I followed him and realized he was feeding an injured cat.”

“Aw. I think I like this Rickard more than I like you.”

I smile a bit. “I think he would’ve liked you more than me too.”

“Oh, wow. Belittling yourself. You need to have more self-confidence.”

“The last time I saw the cat… He was sitting on my brother.”

“On his lap?”

“On his bleeding chest.”

The cat says nothing.

“I almost forgot about that,” I murmur, lost in my thoughts. The cat was on my brother. I don’t know… I’m not sure if the cat was dead too or not, but I… I should’ve gone over and checked. If I did that…”

“You might be dead,” the cat points out.

“Yes.”

“And Zaun would’ve had Dural kill Bellanore’s dad.”

“Or maybe Ronath would’ve killed Dural.”

“Maybe. Who knows? But you don’t want to go down this road,” the cat warns.

“What road?”

“What if. It’s a terrible, terrible path. My witch went down that road, and it led to her demise.”

“Any road I’m on leads to my demise.”

“You want to go that route? Any road anyone is on is a road to their death. How about that?”

“I don’t like this game.”

“You don’t like that you’re losing.” The cat smirks and licks her paw.

For a long moment, we just sit there, and I almost wish the cat would be back in my lap so I can feel a connection to her. My emotions are either heightened, or else they’re starting to become muted again. Last thing I want. That’s a sign that I’m going downhill.

My eyes close of their own accord, and I think back to that terrible day in the forest.

The orange striped cat doesn’t move. His chest doesn’t rise and fall, and considering the cat is on Rickard’s chest, that means he’s not breathing either.

I hate myself now for it, but I don't approach Rickard to check on him or the cat because there's no point. He's gone. My family is dead.

And then, everything jumps forward, to after I'm cursed, after Dural dies, after Zaun gives me a sliver of hope if I become his pawn in some kind of scheme.

I just stand there, lording above Dural, feeling utterly lost. I should be formulating a plan, trying to figure out how I can find this Ronath, coming up with a game plan for ending him, but I can hardly breathe. My chest is so tight, so is my throat, and I’m sweating and trembling. Slowly, I sink to my knees, and I can’t find the strength to stand back up again.

All around me is silence. No one else around me is breathing. There aren’t any animals nearby—no birds, no insects, no small game. Animals understand and fear darkness, and all of the fighting, the murders… it would be enough to drive any sane person away.

Maybe I’m not sane.

But then I hear a strangled gasp. My ears perk up, and my gaze zeroes in on the werewolf who rasps a breath. He's hardly hanging on. His face is turned away from me, so I can't see who it is.

If there’s any chance that another werewolf can survive…

I try to stand and fall over, tripping over my feet, so I opt to crawl over to the werewolf.

Collin.

My alpha.

My nostrils flare, and I find the strength to grab his shirt and yank his upper half off the ground. “You did this,” I hiss.

Collin’s head rolls to the side, and his tongue hangs out of his mouth. He’s half-dead, and he can barely keep his eyes open, but I find the strength to yank him up to his feet.

“Look at all of this! You did this!” I shout.

Collin coughs. Blood gargles, bubbling out of his mouth. I'm so furious and livid and seeing red from both my wound and from his betrayal that I can't focus on his body enough to know what his wounds are. It's not enough that he's dying. He has to see everything that his actions have brought down upon the Alines.

"You made that deal with Dural. What deal? What did you hope to gain?"

Collin coughs again and gives a shuddering gasp, but he says nothing.

"Explain yourself!" I demand. "What were you trying to do? What could that drow have done for us?"

But Collin just hangs his head. He's heavy, oh so heavy, and I grip him by his throat.

"What could that drow have given us?" I shout right into his face.

Collin closes his eyes.

Disgusted, I drop him. He falls to his knees and slumps forward. His arm just manages to stop his fall, so his face doesn't slam to the ground. With a grunt, he tilts onto his side.

I let out a howl. I'm not sure what I do next, but my foot is sore, and he's on his back now. Yes, I might've kicked him, and I don't feel bad about it at all.

"You killed us all!" I shout right into his ear.

Collin flinches away from me. He's alive enough to hear me, but he still hasn't said one word of explanation.

"How could you have thought that a drow, a demonic elf of all creatures, would help us? Of course he betrayed us! Now, the Alines are all dead!"

Collin winces and shuts his eyes. A tear streaks down his face.

I shove his shoulders to the ground even though he's already lying down. Collin takes the abuse without comment, but he might not be able to speak. He's showing no sign of wanting to.

"Some alpha," I spit out. "You don't deserve to be alpha."

I stand and brush the dirt from my hands, watching the particles fall down onto his still body. His wounds are serious, but if he received attention from a healer or a witch, he might yet make it.

But I just stand above him and watch his labored breathing. I do nothing for him, nothing at all.

I stand there until he dies.

In a way, I helped to kill Collin too.

I hang my head at the memory and suppress a shudder.

"What is it?" the cat asks from her perch on the windowsill.

I shake my head.

"I just got a chill," she complains. "It's like someone walked over my grave."

"You don't have a grave."

“Not yet, but I will.”

“Not all cats are buried.”

She huffs a sigh. “My point is that I know that something is causing you a lot of distress.”

“What kind of a witch was she? I swear you’re acting like you know too much psycho-babble.”

“I’ll have you know that she was a psychiatrist.” The cat lifts her nose high into the air.

“Seriously?” I gape at the cat.

“Would I lie to you?”

“Yes, actually. I think you would.”

The cat tilts her head to the side. "Fair point. Yes, I have lied before, but what cat doesn't want a second dinner?"

“I think I’m going to call you Rosie, I think,” I mumble.

“Why Rosie?” The cat wrinkles her nose.

“She’s a hobbit.”

“What’s a hobbit?” The cat licks her paw.

I hesitate. How to explain a hobbit to a cat without sounding insane? Wait, why do I care if the cat thinks I’m insane?

“And what has it got in its pocketses?” the cat meows.

I narrow my eyes at her. “How do you know… I would’ve been good friends with your witch, wouldn’t I?”

“Yeah, she was amazing. Not so good at staying alive, though. She didn’t listen to me, though, and since she’s dead, and I’m still alive, you might want to listen to me.”

"So, you have a suggestion for me to get out of my predicament?" I ask, unashamed to be asking a cat for advice.

“Oh, no. No, I don’t have an idea for you.”

“Fat lot of good you are,” I grumble.

“I’m a cat! You expect too much of me. I’ll tell you what I’ll do. I’ll take a nap.”

“And that’ll help how exactly?” I ask dryly.

“Cats get all of their best ideas when they sleep. Duh. Why do you think we sleep so much?”

“Because you’re lazy.”

“We aren’t lazy! I killed that rat for you, didn’t I?”

“Don’t act like you did that for me.”

“Okay, sure. I did it for me, but that’s because I wanted to actually get closer to you.”

“And you couldn’t do that when the rat was lingering about?”

"Yeah. Rats lurk, and I don't like lurkers. Or stalkers. Or—"

“I get the picture.”

The cat stretches. “Still want to know what caused your distress.”

“A memory,” I admit.

“Which memory?”

“About my alpha. He… He made some kind of deal with the drow that killed my pack. I never did learn what that deal was.”

“Your alpha… Outside of the thing with the drow, was he a good alpha?”

“Yes.”

The word slips out automatically, and with horror, I realize it’s the truth. Collin did everything he could for the Alines. He would give free candy to the kids whenever he saw them. If someone lost a job, he would hire them. He was an electrician, and he taught a lot of the kids how to tinker and build stuff. There were times when Collin would do everything he could to prevent businesses from shutting down, even the businesses run by humans.

Deep down, Collin had been more than a decent alpha.

So why would he make a deal with a drow? Had the drow tricked him from the very beginning? What could the drow have offered Collin that the alpha would risk everyone’s lives and safety for it?

I haven't been back to my hometown since I left. I even sold my parents' house while I was away. There might be answers in Collin's house, but I don't think I can handle going there.

Maybe I’ll never learn why my pack had to die, and maybe I had been wrong to not seek treatment for Collin. If he had been saved, I might have been able to take on Ronath with his help. My parents and brother might already be alive.

Deep down, I know the truth.

The reason why I never truly sought out Ronath and tried to kill him to lift the curse is because of the guilt I’ve endured over the truth.

I killed Collin.

Not Dural.

I killed my alpha.

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Chapter 6

Bellanore

Dad basically banishes me away, and I'm too shaken up to go anywhere near my mom. An encounter with her that ends badly right after my dad has scared the living daylights out of me? No thank you.

So, with my head down and my "tail" tucked between my legs, I teleport back to Robb. He's eyeing the potion, and my heart aches. He's scared and desperate, and plenty of scared people will do crazy things. So will desperate people. He's both, the poor guy, and I can't imagine what he's going through.

"Are you going to take it?" I ask.

Robb blinks and jerks back, clearly startled.

"I'm sorry," I murmur, crossing over to squeeze his shoulder. His muscles are tight, so I start to rub and massage them. "I didn't mean to scare you."

"You just surprised me. That's all. How did it go with your mom?"

I grimace, but since I'm standing behind him as he sits at his desk chair, he can't see my face.

"That bad, huh?"

"Well, you see, I didn't—"

Robb jerks, grabbing his arm and then toward his chest. He slumps down, falling straight out of the chair and half onto the ground.

The cat jumps over. "Do you hear that?"

"Hear what?" I help Robb to the ground to lie down flat on his back.

"His heart," the cat meows. She licks his ear.

I want to shoo her away, but what scares me the most is that he doesn't react to the cat. His eyes are closed, and he's not moving at all.

Not even his chest.

His heart. I *don't* hear it.

Now that's what scares me the most.

I shake Robb, my hands pressing down on his chest, and his eyelids flutter, and I can hear his heartbeat. It's faint, but it's there.

My hands shake as I help Robb to sit up. “Your heart…”

“I’m fine,” he says, but he sounds weak, looks weak…

He’s weak.

No. He’s dying.

There’s only so long he can hang on for, and the measures he’s taken to try to borrow time are only making him weaker. It’s only a matter of time before he dies.

“Is that the first time anything like that has happened?” I grill him.

His hesitation is answer enough.

“It’s from the Mystic Twilight abuse, isn’t it?” I demand. “You can’t just drink that.”

“Yeah, yeah. Not my first heart episode. I get it. I… Bellanore…”

"Here." I pull him up by his shirt and embrace him, but it's a ploy. I teleport us to Cinnamon Chance, not so we can eat whatever cinnamon-laden dish they're serving today but so that I can talk to one of the fairies here. Rhonda Rainbow. She's a good friend of Robb's, and right now, we need all the help we can get. Yes, I've talked to witches before, but I don't really know any of them. I don't know if I can trust them, and I can't risk going to someone I can't trust. Not with Robb's life on the line.

As soon as we arrive, Robb slumps against me. He can barely walk, and I end up half-dragging him inside.

Rhonda's there, talking to a couple in front of us. She directs them to a booth and then flies over to us, takes one look at Robb, and all of the colors drain from her face.

“What is going on here?” she hisses. “Robb, you aren’t supposed to ever look like this.”

“No? What’s wrong with how I look?” he mumbles.

“You’re supposed to be a strong, strapping werewolf, not a runt.” She curls back her upper lip in disgust, and I know it’s supposed to be playful, that she’s trying to get him to smile, but he can barely lift his head to look at the fairy.

Rhonda turns over her shoulder. “Cass, I gotta go.”

“What do you mean? We’re about to—”

“I’ll be back.”

“When?” Cass cries.

“Don’t know.” Rhonda turns to us. “Ready?”

Without waiting for a response, she sprinkles fairy dust on us, and we’re whisked away. Robb falls out of my arms and onto the sidewalk, and Rhonda and I struggle to get him back up on his feet again.

“What is going on with him?” Rhonda demands.

“Cursed,” Robb mutters.

“What kind of curse?” Rhonda asks me.

“Robb’s a lone wolf. His pack is… He doesn’t have a pack, and he

can't form a new one. He's been taking Mystic Twilight to try to prolong his life, but…" I bite my lower lip. "I didn't know who else to come to. I'm sorry. I know you're busy, and I don't want you to get fired."

"Pshaw. Don't you worry about me. I'm the best waitress at Cinnamon Chance. Trust me. I get more customers to come through the door and to come back. Before me, people would take a chance once and then be done. Treat it like a novelty, you know? But I convince them to come back, to experience more cinnamon delights. That's how you get people to become lifelong addicts." She winks.

"Where did you bring us?" I ask, glancing at the building we're standing before. It looks like a boring building, perfectly non-descript, the kind of building no one would pay attention to at all.

"Given the looks of him…" Rhonda glances at Robb. He's barely conscious. "Inside is a witch who owes me a favor."

"Do you trust her?" I ask sharply.

"Dollface, I wouldn't have brought us here if I didn't. I don't usually collect favors, so if I have one… let's just say it's because I do trust her, and I know she can pay up. If anyone can help Robb, she can."

"What's her name?"

"Sierra Shadowsoul."

"Um, I'm not sure I like the sound of her," I mumble.

"You shouldn't judge a person based on their surname." Rhonda clucks with her tongue. "Besides, you're half-demon, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"So is Sierra."

"You want us to—"

"Who cursed Robb? Someone demonic, right?"

"Yes, a drow," I admit.

"Well then, who's better equipped to right this terrible wrong than someone else who is demonic?"

"You trust her?" I ask again.

"You trust me, or else you wouldn't have sought me out," Rhonda says impatiently. "He's going to die on us out here if we keep flapping our gums. Come on."

She flies up to the door and knocks three times, pauses, knocks twice more, pauses, and then knocks four times in quick succession.

The door opens by itself.

Rhonda flies back over to help me guide Robb inside.

The inside of the nondescript building is a wonder. It's amazing. There are all kinds of trinkets and magical artifacts all over the place. I can sense the magic, even though I have no idea what the items can do. Talismans, gemstones, weapons… Potions after potions… The walls are lined with shelves, all filled, and there are even items

suspended from the ceiling.

It almost looks like a shop of some kind.

Placing a statue of a dragon on a shelf is a beautiful woman with white wavy hair that falls down to her rump. Her dress is purple and shimmers in the candlelight.

Her eyes are turquoise, and they hone in on Rhonda.

"You've finally come to collect what is owed you."

“I have,” Rhonda says.

“And just what do you want from me? Sierra asks.

“Can’t you see? You have eyes.” Rhonda snorts.

“You wish to use up your favor on him?”

“Do I have to spell it out for you?” Rhonda snaps.

I bristle. Rhonda’s never sounded so sharp before. She’s on edge as much as I am, and I bite my lower lip. I don’t want anything to happen to Robb, but can we trust this Sierra? Why am I so distrustful lately? Is it because I know how terrible people can be? I’ve been given a hard hand, but it’s nothing compared to what Robb’s had to endure. I don’t want anything to happen to him, and curses are powerful magic. The witch won’t be able to lift it. If she tries, it might kill Robb on the spot.

“He’s been cursed,” I start.

The witch waves her arm. Her long sleeves fall away, split in half, the fabric reaches down almost to her knees. "I could sense the darkness surrounding him the moment you entered, demonic werewolf."

My nostrils flare. “Do you want to know the particulars?”

“How about we go to the back room.” She claps her hands, and Robb rises up and floats over, following behind the witch.

I don’t like that she’s using telekinesis on him, but I’m not going to complain.

In the back room, hundreds of candles hang suspended from the ceiling. With a snap of her fingers, Sierra lights every last candle. Each has a small basin beneath them to collect melted wax.

She has him lie down on a wooden table. Her eyes close as she touches his temples. Her fingers turn a bright green and then black. They appear ready to fall off before she lowers her arms to her side.

“Well?” I demand.

“You heard her. Well?” Rhonda crosses her arms and taps her foot. Her wings flutter a hundred times a second, but she has her feet firmly on the ground.

“I can stabilize his heart,” she says, “but it won’t stop another episode from happening again.”

“Can you make his heart strong enough that another attack won’t…” I can’t finish the rest.

“I will do what I can,” the witch promises, “but he’s weak. Very weak.”

“Mystic Twilight—”

"Ah, yes. It probably gave him a decent enough chance at life, so he was almost nearly strong enough to survive having no pack—"

“You know all that?” I blurt out.

“I took a peek into his mind,” Sierra says calmly.

“You invaded his—”

“I need to know what I’m dealing with,” she says. “Now, I need you to hush.”

Her hands hover above Robb’s heart. Abruptly, there’s a clatter in the front room. Seconds later, a dagger floats through the door to the witch’s hand.

I start to go forward, but Rhonda grabs my arm.

“You might not want to watch this,” the fairy says idly.

I’m beside myself. I don’t want to leave Robb’s side, and I grab his hand and squeeze it.

He doesn’t squeeze back. He’s passed out.

The witch… she can’t help Robb, not enough. We need more. A spell, a potion…

The potion.

In the blink of an eye, I leave and return. I’m not sure if the others knew I left at all, but I impatiently wait for the witch to finish whatever it is that she’s doing. The potion feels warm through the glass vial, or maybe I’m what’s warm. I feel as if I’m burning up, burning alive.

The witch uses the dagger to cut her palm, and she stretches out the blood droplets, moving her hands to fashion the drop so that it twists and elongates and molds itself into a heart, not a heart like we draw for Valentine’s Day but a heart like the organ. Then, she lowers her hands, and the bloody heart goes through Robb’s close to where his heart is.

“There, that’s all I can—”

“What about this?” I ask, shoving the potion toward her.

The witch accepts the vial from me. She unstoppers it and uses her hand to waft the opening of the vial. Her nostrils flare as she sniffs, and then she turns the vial this way and that, peering at it.

“It’s strong, whatever it is.”

“You’ve never seen anything like it before?” I ask, dejected.

“I haven’t either,” Rhonda pipes up. “Not that you asked me.”

I shrug, and she gives me a wry smile. Even though I know she’s just messing with me, I’m not in the mood.

Without warning, Robb sits up. Without a word, he yanks the potion out of Sierra’s hands.

Without hesitating, Robb drinks it, every last drop, and I stare at him in horror, terrified that he might've just made a terrible mistake.

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Chapter 7

Bellanore

I'm a good girlfriend. I am, even if we haven't been using labels in a while, and I'm not entirely certain that Robb considers us dating. We're in some kind of weird limbo, not only with his life hanging in the balance but with our relationship too.

And that won't do.

But because I'm a good girlfriend, I just smile at Robb and wait for Rhonda and Sierra to finish their business. Robb and I thank them both, and finally, finally, I teleport us back to Robb's room.

But that's when I can no longer hold back.

"What were you thinking?" I demand. "How could you take that? What if you died right then and there? What if—"

"How about you ask me how I'm feeling?" Robb asks.

I don't want to relent, so I just give him a look.

He counters by lifting his eyebrow.

My eyes burn with tears, and I take a few deep breaths. "Yoga doesn't work," I grumble.

"A few deep breaths isn't yoga," he says with a laugh. "Ask me how I'm feeling."

"Fine. How are you feeling?"

"I'm terrified. I'm scared. I'm nervous and worried. Through all of that, most of all, I know that I won't let you go through all of this alone."

I melt. Robb holds out his arms, and I practically run into them, embracing him, never wanting to let him go. He lifts my chin, and our lips press together in a kiss that's basically a vow.

"I know all of that," I tell him, staring up at him as we continue to hold one another. "I'm terrified and scared and nervous and worried too. You don't have to be concerned, though. I won't let you go through this alone either, but…"

"Ask me how I'm feeling," he repeats.

I stare up at him and roll my eyes.

"Do it."

“Fine. How are you feeling?” I parrot.

He grins and winks at me before kissing the tip of my nose. “I feel like I can take on a demon.”

“Robb,” I say faintly.

“I feel like I’m stronger than ever before.”

The cursed werewolf releases me and takes a step back. He flexes his arms, and I can’t help stepping forward and touching. There’s no doubt about it. The potion really did affect his strength.

How is this possible? Just what was in that potion? How did the demon get his hands on it? Demons can’t make potions. He must be working with a witch.

What if the potion didn’t come from Zaun? I do think it’s highly likely that the potion came from the demon. Who else would’ve given it to Robb?

“It’s great that you feel strong,” I say slowly, “but we don’t know how long this will last or if it’ll have some kind of complication down the road like the Mystic Twilight did.”

Robb just smiles.

“What?”

“I feel.”

“You feel what exactly?”

“I feel everything. I feel so much more than just the fear and all of that.”

The look he’s giving makes me grin, and I shriek with laughter as he grabs me and starts to dance.

“You look beautiful.”

“Thank you.” I stare up at him. “I never knew you were a dancer.”

He dips me. It's not the smoothest of moves, but I don't fall, so I count that as a win. "I'm not really."

“No?”

He spins me, and I laugh again. There’s not a lot of room for us to do this.

After a few more moves, Robb pulls me close, and I lay my head on his shoulder. We sway slightly, listening to the beat of our hearts as the only music in the room. I slowly lift my head to stare up at him, and we go to kiss.

But the cat jumps onto the desk right by our elbows, and she plants her paws on our arms.

“So, you all better now?” she asks.

With a sigh, I step away from Robb. The cat, I swear, winks at me.

I stick my tongue out at her.

She swats toward me.

Robb chuckles. “Do you sense the magic yet?” he asks.

“Yes. It’s more so than before, but it’s different now.”

“The curse couldn’t have been lifted,” I say slowly.

“It’s not lifted,” the cat says. “More like covered up.”

“That explains why I feel like myself for the first time since…”

“Since the curse was first spoken?”

Robb grimaces, and something passes over his face that I don't understand. Guilt maybe? He still feels guilty that everyone else in his pack died, but it's not his fault. Dural did it to appease Zaun.

And now, Zaun has Robb in his clutches.

“So what do we do now?” the cat asks. “Personally, I think we should eat.”

“Not a bad idea,” I admit. “Do you want to head out to eat? Or should I just grab us something and bring it back here?”

“As much as I would love to take you out to a fine dining establishment, I don’t think we should.”

“We definitely shouldn’t,” the cat interjects. “Seriously. Fine dining establishments don’t like cats, so no. No go.”

I grin. “I’ll be right back.”

I teleport away. There are a fair number of students who are waiting in a line to get their food, but I bypass them, grab two plates, and am gone before they can start to complain or even realize what just happened.

Robb and I eat in silence, and I offer some of my food to the cat. She eats a lot more than I would’ve thought, and I tease her by saying I thought only dogs liked people food.

“You haven’t spent time around a lot of cats, have you?” she asks.

“Is it that obvious?”

“Painfully. Don’t worry. I won’t hold it against you since you love me so much.”

“I do. I love you so very much. I just wish I could call you by a name. Your witch had to have called you something more than just Cat, right?”

“She did.”

“And…”

Robb snorts.

The cat grins. “And I’m not saying.” She lifts her tail high into the air, jumps onto the bed, and then leaps onto the windowsill. The cat doesn’t settle to sleep, though, just watching us as we finish our meals.

Robb pushes his tray aside and brushes his hands together. “We have to find out what is going on with your dad.”

“I know.”

“Because it seems like maybe we’ll have to stand up and fight him.”

“If what Draz died trying to tell us is any indication, Dad’s into something serious and dangerous and…” I swallow hard. “And

possibly evil."

"We might have to end him depending on what we find," Robb says slowly. "Are you going to be okay with that?"

"I think so, but…"

"But what? We need to be on the same page here." Robb looks at me eagerly. There's a fire burning in his eyes. I've never seen him so alive before, and it's breathtaking. There are tiny gold specks in his eyes that I never saw before. He's so handsome and strong, not just physically. Most people would've been far too broken given everything he's been through, but he found me.

He found love.

Robb chuckles and takes my hand in his. We're sitting on his bed, facing each other, our legs hanging off the one side, our knees almost touching. His thumb runs along my knuckles.

"Are you going to stare at me all day or answer my question?" he asks.

"Which question?"

"Are you going to be okay with handling your dad if it becomes clear that the only way to stop him is to kill him?"

I rub the back of my neck with my free hand. "I… Depending on what we find, if it's necessary… Yes. I will do it."

"I will."

I roll my eyes. "That doesn't matter. What does matter is finding out what Dad's up to, and the best way to do that is for us to go and see my dad again. I can be a mole—"

"I don't like the idea of that at all," he says firmly. "Wait. Again? When did you see your dad?"

I swallow hard. That's right. I never admitted what I did earlier because Robb had that heart attack. Was it a real heart attack? Or just a heart episode? Either way, I don't want to make him upset right now. That can't be good for him.

But I also won't lie to him.

"I didn't go to see my mom earlier like we talked about. I thought it would be better to see my dad."

"Are you joking? Because that's not funny."

"No, I'm serious. I… I saw Dad."

Robb shakes his hand and jumps to his feet. "You went to see your dad."

"Yes."

"Why? What did you hope to accomplish?"

"Basically what I still want to accomplish. I want to get back on his good side."

"Does he even have a good side?" Robb growls.

"Hey," I snap. "I know him. You don't. You think that just because

he's a demon that he's evil, that he should be killed, that it's no big deal. It is a big deal! It's a huge deal! My dad… He's not the best of people, no, but out of my parents, he's the one who has been there for me, and that counts for something."

"Or maybe he's counting on you thinking that way," Robb challenges.

"Look, this isn't easy on me, okay? I think you can understand that, can't you? It's not that I want to have to pick sides."

"You might have to do that," Robb snaps. "You might have to do exactly that, and…" He blows out a breath.

"And what? I know that most everyone would think it's a no-brainer. Duh. Save your boyfriend. Kill your demon dad, but if I do that, Robb, I'm basically an orphan. I know that he's probably done a lot of terrible things in his lifetime, but I haven't seen any of that. For the most part, the dad I know loves me. He wants me to be strong and powerful and—"

"I get that. I do," Robb says. "Don't think I don't know what I'm asking. Don't think that I want this. I don't want to have to kill again. If I fail, if this all goes south… Bellanore, I'm going to go to Hell."

"Why would you think that? You might've started the fight with Dural, but he would've hunted you down and killed you."

"Yeah, but I deserve to go to Hell, okay? And if I go there, I won't see my family ever again. I can't… I just want… I have to do this."

"You want to do as much digging as possible to get me to help you kill my dad," I say slowly. "You want me to help you no matter what. That's what this is about, isn't it? You want me to be involved."

"You are involved, aren't you?" Robb asks harshly. "Because you love me and you love him, and you know it's a matter of one of us living or one of us dying."

"Or maybe I'll lose you both!" I shout. "I can't… I can't handle this right now."

I throw up my arms, jerk to my feet, and rush out of the door.

I'm not sure why I opt to go for a walk. Well, almost a run. For whatever reason, I don't teleport away, and Robb's not exactly light on his feet as he races to catch up to me. It's warm outside, almost too warm, unseasonably warm as if the tensions running high all around us are increasing the temperature.

"You lied to me," Robb says. "Why didn't you just tell me that you weren't up for talking to your mom? I thought that you could really talk to her, that you could get to know her. I want you to have a relationship with her—"

"So that I can have a mom again once my dad's been killed," I say bitterly, staring straight ahead, not daring to look at him. I can't admit that he's right, that I do love him. I can't deny it because I don't want

to lie to him, which is why I told him about seeing my dad in the first place.

"How was your dad?" Robb grumbles.

"Like you care!"

"I wouldn't ask if I didn't want to know!"

"Do you hear yourself? 'How was your dad?'" I mock in a perfect impersonation of his voice.

Robb shudders. "That freaks me out."

"Don't," I warn.

"Don't what?"

"Don't act like everything is okay."

A huge grin breaks out on his face. "I'm not that good of an actor. I couldn't do that if I tried. The world is falling apart around us and not just because of the curse and your dad and his nefarious dealings. Your dad killed Draz, don't forget."

I say nothing but pick up the pace. I'm flat-out running now, and the burn in my lungs feels so good. I welcome the pain, embrace it.

Pain means I'm alive.

But pain is also coming for me—the pain of loss.

This can't end well. None of it. The werewolf/vampire conflict is going to have more casualties. More people will die, possibly friends.

And then Robb or my dad…

Tears blur my vision, and I'm running even harder now, trying to get away from Robb, from the pain, from everything.

But that potion is a miracle because he's right alongside me, and then even ahead of me to cut me off, and I draw up short to realize that we're near the border of Moonstone Academy near Silver Ironwoods, the forest that separates the werewolf school from Blood Haven Academy, where the vampires, including my cousin Romelia, go.

Werewolf guards come over to us immediately. At least none of the grim reapers are around. Even I find them a little unsettling. If the moonlight hits them just right, you can see their skulls through their skin.

"Where do you think you're going?" one of the guards asks.

I give a perfectly wide smile. "If you must know, I—"

"She's coming to see me," a familiar voice says.

A female voice.

A voice rather like mine but slightly deeper.

My mom's voice.

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Chapter 8

Robb

I gape at the werewolf. With blond hair and the same eyes as Bellanore's, although minus the glow I've come to love, this werewolf looks so much like my girlfriend that there's no doubt that she is Bellanore's mom.

She speaks with the guards in quiet tones. "This is my daughter, and you are not to keep me from seeing her."

"You understand that we aren't to allow anyone—"

"You understand that my daughter is a half-demon who can teleport in and out of this place despite the ridiculous wards you had witches put up?"

Bellanore flinches. She takes a half step back, and I hate that she's so unnerved by the sight of her mom. Maybe I had been wrong to get so upset that she lied and saw her dad. Clearly, Bellanore and her mom have issues, and I knew that. I know that, but Bellanore needs her mom now more than ever, and maybe her mom realizes that because why else would she be here?

Or maybe I'm reading into things too much, and Bellanore is just upset that her mom outed her powers to the guards. That's a legit gripe.

Maybe both.

The guards continue to argue with Bellanore's mom, who gives Bellanore a wide smile and then removes her hand from her coat. She brings her open palm to her mouth, and she blows a breath. Haze avitores comes over the guards, and the werewolf crosses onto the campus, hooks her arms with Bellanore and then me, and walks away as the herb takes effect on the guards and making them forget that we were ever there.

"Mom," Bellanore says stiffly, "this is Robb Aline. You'll like him. He likes to use that herb too."

"It's very handy to have when you're dealing with peasants, and you don't have time for nonsense."

"Why, Mother, that sounds positively demonic. What has come

over you?"

I clear my throat. Time for me to let these two have some privacy so they can sort out their issues.

I hope.

"It's, ah, nice to meet you, Mrs., ah, Mrs. Shade, but I think I should be going."

Bellanore's mom just smiles and shakes her head.

Bellanore yanks herself free from her mom and marches around to my side to grab my other arm, so I'm linked to both of them.

"No, stay," she says, and the look in her eye has me nodding.

She's afraid.

Afraid of what? Why would she fear her mom?

I'm not sure, but she clearly wants to use me as a buffer, and I will do anything for her.

Even not kill her dad?

I'm not going to think about that right now.

"It's very nice to meet you too," Mrs. Shade says as if Bellanore hadn't interrupted us. "I am glad to see that Bellanore has met someone."

"Have you asked Ellamaria about me?" Bellanore asks coldly. "Because then you might already know about Robb and me."

"It's possible that Ellamaria may have mentioned that you met a boy, and then that you seemed to break up, and that you are back together again. You might not like to hear this, but on-again, off-again relationships—"

"You don't know me or the situation we're in, so maybe you should just save your judgment, Mom. If you wanted a role in my life, maybe you shouldn't have avoided seeing me for so long. Maybe you shouldn't have turned my entire pack against me. Maybe—"

"You have a lot of anger and vitriol for me, and I understand that, but perhaps there is somewhere a bit more private where we can talk without…" Her mom glances around. There are a few other students about who glance our way.

"Fine," Bellanore snaps, and she leads us to the cave.

I'm not sure I want to go inside, and I hesitate. Her mom releases my arm to go inside first, but Bellanore stops beside me.

"This okay?" she murmurs.

"Do you not want the cat around? We could go to my room," I suggest.

"I'm not worried about the cat overhearing, but you live with other werewolves, and them I don't want to know my personal business."

I lift my eyebrows.

"Yes," she says in a huff, "I know we've talked about things in your room that I wish no one overheard, but… What's done is done."

“I hope you will feel that way,” her mom calls from deep inside the cave.

“What’s done is done as far as washing my hands of you?” Bellanore asks as she marches inside. She tugs on her skirt as if she’s uncomfortable in her own skin, something I’ve never seen before.

I can’t help it. A part of me hates Mrs. Shade for making Bellanore feel this way. No wonder Bellanore didn’t go to see her.

Before Bellanore can reach her mom, I rush up to my girlfriend and tug on her arm. “I’m sorry,” I murmur into her ear.

The corners of her lips curl upward ever so slightly, the only indication that she heard me, but then she halts, lifts onto her toes, and kisses my cheek.

“Me too,” she whispers back.

“You know, it means a lot more when you say the words,” I tease her.

“Yeah, yeah.” She waves her hand, and I grab it so we can hold hands as we approach her mom, who looks like an entirely different person.

When she first came to the guards, she had been dignity personified. She had been as prim and proper as they came, and she seemed very loose and relaxed.

Now, she looks desperate, as if she’s hanging by a string.

I know that feeling all too well.

Still, she claps her hands together in front of her face and gives us a smile. It’s tight, and it makes the crow’s feet by her eyes appear.

“Bellanore, I ask you to please allow me to speak. I wish to explain myself.”

“I’ll listen,” Bellanore says slowly in a tone that suggests she expects she won’t like what she’s about to hear.

I squeeze her hand, and she squeezes back. After a moment, I squeeze her hand three times. There’s hardly a pause before she squeezes back three times and then a fourth.

I love you.

I love you too.

We haven’t said the words aloud yet, but honestly, that doesn’t matter.

Although, I do want to be sure to say them aloud before we face her dad just in case it all goes south.

Knowing our luck, it’ll head all the way south down to Hell.

“When I first met your father, I didn’t know what to think. He was devilishly good looking, a smooth talker… He had all the right words, the right moves…”

“Mom,” Bellanore gripes.

Her mom smiles. “I fell in love with him without meaning to, and

I… I still love him."

Bellanore snorts.

Her mom glares at her. "I do, but I could see that he was becoming more and more dangerous. He had the potential to fall back on his old habits. I… My love, I should say, managed to bring out the good in him, but I was afraid of what I had always known he was capable of."

"If you brought out the good in him, why did you leave?" Bellanore cries. "If you were afraid he was going to turn to darkness, why didn't you stay to be his light?"

"That's a very good question, Bellanore, and I sometimes wish that I didn't…" Her mom lifts her head up to stare at the ceiling, but when she brings her head down again, her eyes are closed. A single tear runs down her cheek. Only after it drips off her chin does she open her eyes again. "I left… and I have to deal with the consequences."

Bellanore squeezes my hand so tightly that she causes my bones to grind.

"I sought out a witch for a prophecy. I wanted to see if I could help your father get to the point that he could be one of the best demons —"

"A good demon," I supply.

Bellanore glares at me, but her mom nods.

"Yes." She beams at me.

"What did this witch say?" Bellanore asks idly as if she isn't hanging onto her mom's every word.

"She said that if I stayed, that your father would become powerful and terrible." Her mom stares off into the distance for a long moment.

"That's what she said? Word for word?" Bellanore asks.

"Only… only I think I misunderstood her," Mrs. Shade murmurs. "'Your love will cause him to think himself invincible. He will grow to abuse that love and seek to assault the realm of light, and he will become one of the most powerful, terrible demons of all time.' That is the precise prophecy. So you understand why I had to leave, don't you?"

Bellanore says nothing.

"But she didn't just mean my love," her mom continues. "She meant my love *and* your love. We created a monster by trying to love and change a demon. We created one of the most powerful, terrible demons of all time."

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Chapter 9

Bellanore

I can scarcely believe what I'm hearing. Love did this? My love for Dad, her love for her husband? Love created evil? How is that possibly right?

My jaw drops open, but I say nothing. There's nothing for me to say. I'm shocked, too shocked to even look up at Robb to see his face, but then he squeezes my hand three times.

He's here for me, no matter what.

My mom stands before me, all alone, the perfect picture of tragic beauty. Her hair is a little blonder than I remember. Maybe there's a white strand here or there mixed in, which would make us look even more alike, although I have black hair compared to her blond.

"I… I have been using Draz to keep an eye on your dad."

"You?" I gasp. "So that's why he stalled with Dad about… What is it that Dad wanted from Draz anyhow?"

"I should be asking you why you didn't rat out Draz to your dad," she counters softly with a smile that reaches her eyes, a smile I haven't seen in years and years.

I shake my head. "I… I was afraid of what Dad might do to him if I told Dad the truth. But you're the reason why Draz reached out to me, why he tried to plants seeds so I would distrust Dad."

"I never wanted to come between you and your father, but I should've. I should've taken you with me, but I thought… I thought wrong. Prophecies can be wrong, and I hoped this one would be."

"But you thought it might be. That's why you left."

"Yes, but your love for your dad… I fear that your dad…"

"Why?" I spit out. "Why wasn't our love enough for him? Why did he have to have more? More wealth? Who cares about money! And what's next? What plan does he have that will make him so terrible?"

"I haven't been able to talk to Draz in some time. Your father has become very paranoid and tight-lipped. He trusts a very few select people, and Draz—"

"Do you know that he's dead?" I ask quietly.

Mom shuts her eyes a moment and heaves a sigh. Sadness darkens her green eyes. “I feared that was the case.”

“He was trying to talk to us about Dad.” I blink a few times. “He said I should… He wanted to help Robb.”

“Help Robb with what?”

I swallow hard. “Do you want to tell her?” I ask Robb.

He clears his throat. “It’s a long story, but I’ll make it short. I’m the only Aline alive.”

My mom glances from Robb to me, and I flush.

“I didn’t mean to turn Ember pack against you,” my mom says, a hint of desperation coloring her words. “I don’t want you to feel like you two need to rush forward and become a new pack just so Robb—”

I hold up a hand to stop her right there before she makes things even more awkward than they already are.

“It’s not like that,” Robb assures her. “It’s complicated. My pack was betrayed by a drow and killed so the drow could gain stature in the eyes of a demon. I killed the drow, but before his last breath, he cursed me so that I can’t join another pack.”

“How long ago was this?” My mom’s eyes widen. “How are you on your feet? You look far too healthy—”

Robb grimaces. “The demon, Zaun—”

“Ah. A necromancer. He will resurrect your pack if you…”

“Zaun wants Dad dead, Mom,” I say calmly.

My mom blinks a few times. "I see," she says after a short pause. "You're dating a cursed werewolf who is to kill your father."

“Robb didn’t mean for me to fall for him.” I glance at him.

“No. At that point, my emotions were already stunted,” Robb says.

“And then he started to head downhill, so he began to drink Mystic Twilight—”

“Your heart.” Mom’s hands go to her mouth.

“Don’t worry. Zaun gave me a potion, and now, I feel just fine.”

“You drank it?” Mom actually facepalms. Under any other circumstances, it would’ve been hilarious. “I suppose you had no choice, but truly…”

“We have to do what we have to do,” I say firmly, “and I know that it’s all a mess, and I don’t want… I don’t…” My shoulders slump.

Even after hearing the prophecy and Dad’s twisted take on our love for him, I still feel the need to have proof that he’s committed any serious wrongdoing that would warrant a reason for killing him.

Which is ridiculous. We’re playing with Robb’s life. We’ve been lucky, beyond lucky, that we’ve extended his life magically despite the curse, but eventually, those measures will fail, and the curse will claim his life.

And the prophecy itself is magic. That magic and Zaun both want

Ronath dead. They are pointing to that being necessary.

Why does Zaun want Dad dead? Does that demon know what Dad's capable of, what he's becoming?

"Maybe love can bring Dad back around," I blurt out even though I know I sound like a little girl clinging to hope when hope has long since died. "I mean, love should be the answer, right? Love is always the answer. Who knows? Maybe we can get Dad to convince Zaun…"

Robb just gives me a look. "Yeah, I'm sure that will work out real well. If your dad knew what tricks Zaun has up his sleeves, your dad would kill him without blinking. Your dad isn't going to force Zaun to resurrect anyone, and besides, I wouldn't trust Zaun to bring back my pack's minds, bodies, and souls if he's coerced into it."

"Yeah, you're right," I mumble. "It's just…"

"Love should change a person for the better, and most of the time, that's exactly the case, but demons… Demons aren't like us. There are some that are decent and almost good people. They aren't the typical demons, and they're few and far between for a good reason."

"Romelia's father," I blurt out. "Is he one of the good ones?"

My mom swallows hard. "I don't know Magmar all that well to tell you one way or another."

"What all did Draz tell you about Dad?" I ask eagerly. "What do we know about his operations?"

"Your father has always been a bit of a risk-taker," Mom says. "He's made and lost fortunes over the years. Wealth has always been something of a status symbol among demons and many of the other long-lived species."

"So he wanted wealth, and he has it. What does he want to use that wealth for?" I ask.

"Your father never trusted Draz enough to tell him. Imps aren't known for being trustworthy, and they aren't the most loyal of sorts either."

"How could you trust Draz, then?" Robb asks curiously.

"Well, when you save one's wife…" Mom smiles. "Dara is the sweetest little pixie you've ever seen. They make the cutest… Made," she corrects herself softly with a sad shake of her head. "They made the cutest couple."

"You saved his wife from what?" I ask.

"A gnome attack," Mom says airily. "Imps and gnomes hate each other almost as much as werewolves and vampires do."

"Do you think Dad suspected Draz of being a mole?" I ask.

"It's possible, or maybe he just doesn't trust anyone." Mom hangs her head and mumbles, "What if he didn't trust Draz because I left? What if my leaving him caused this darkness of his to come to the surface quicker than if we had both left him?"

“Mom, there’s no way to know, so I don’t want you to worry and freak out about what might have been.”

“But if I hadn’t left you behind…” She covers her mouth with her hand as tears run down her face. A fat drop lands right by her thumb. “Leaving you was so hard, but I thought it was only my love that would send him over. I… You know witches. They never clarify their prophecies, and I thought you was meant singular. I never once thought that it meant you too. If I had… I should have told you, but I didn’t want you to have that hanging over your head. You were young… You’re still young.”

“I’m seventeen, Mom, almost eighteen.”

“You’ll always be my princess.”

Beside me, Robb makes a slight sound. Curious, I glance up at him.

He kisses my temple and whispers, “So that’s why you didn’t want me to call you princess.”

My eyes widen as he pulls back. I almost forgot about him calling me that once.

“Queen,” he murmurs.

“I told you already. I’m no queen.”

“You treat her like one, though,” Mom calls.

“You’re so nosy, Mom.”

“I have to make up for lost time,” she says lightly, but the look in her eyes is filled with heavy emotion.

“You did what you thought was right. Now, though…” I swallow hard. “Shortly before Draz died, he told Robb he was going to help him kill him and that I should want to help, that the fate of the world hangs in the balance.” I bite my lower lip. “Is that the case, Mom, do you think?”

“I do think that might be the case. Or it will become the case.” Mom hangs her head. “And it’s all my fault.”

“It’s not, Mom. Just think. Maybe if you had stayed, this would’ve happened even faster. Maybe whatever Dad is planning would’ve already come together and could’ve changed the fabric of the world itself long ago. I don’t know. Please don’t worry about the past. We have to move forward.”

“We,” Mom murmurs. “I love the sound of that. Bellanore, you can’t know how much it hurt me to leave you. I… I love you, and I love your father. I just thought… I didn’t want to take you away from your father. I know how much you love him, and I didn’t want him to have no one. How could love have turned him into a monster? I didn’t understand. I still don’t understand. I thought my love was tainted, but yours… I didn’t realize that, in this instance, love itself could be so twisted and vile.”

“Love isn’t always a good thing,” Robb interjects. “Love can turn

into obsession. Love can be twisted and distorted. Love in and of itself isn't always a good thing."

"But this…" I hold one of Robb's hands and reach out to clasp one of my mom's. "This is a good thing. Together, we can learn what Dad is up to, and from there, we can decide what to do."

"So, what's the plan?" Robb asks.

"All right, so basically," I start, holding up three fingers and ticking them off in turn as I add, "I'm going to learn every demonic ability that I can without Dad's help. Mom's going to learn everything she can about Dad and what he's planning, and, Robb?"

"Yes?"

I lean up to kiss his cheek. "You're not allowed to die."

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Chapter 10

Robb

I'm not allowed to die. As if I have a say in the matter and as if that's going to be enough for me.

But I smile and nod and bid farewell to Mrs. Shade. The idea of Bellanore starting her demonic training alone doesn't sit well with me, but she shoos me away back to my room. She wants to use the cave as her training grounds.

"I'm afraid I'll get nervous if you're around," she says as she physically pushes me toward the cave's opening.

"Is being nervous around me such a bad thing?"

"Oh, you." She swats my arm before kissing my cheek. "Besides, you should go see to the cat."

"We have a fur baby together?"

"Basically, yes. I guess." She shrugs but then grins. "Maybe one day, we'll have a real baby."

"You're way too optimistic for a demonic werewolf."

"There's nothing wrong with hope," she protests.

"Hope can be very dangerous," I counter.

"Well, I hope you have fun with the cat and then get some rest."

"But I—"

"No buts," she says cheerfully. "Goodbye!"

I grumble to myself, but I leave.

And when I say I leave, I don't just mean I leave the cave.

I leave the entire campus behind.

It's not easy, not with the wards the witches have cast over the place, but there are a few areas of weakness, such as a bush that is right on the border of the campus grounds. For whatever reason, this bush doesn't have the barrier to prevent my leaving, and the guards don't seem to have realized this because none are around, and I crawl through the underbrush and keep on going.

There's a dive bar not too far away from campus called The Drunken Mind. It's dark inside, the lighting terrible instead of creating ambiance. A cockroach scampers across the counter, and the

bartender uses a glass to try to squash it.

The bartender, an orc, nods to me. His tusks are more than a little yellow, and the rest of his teeth are rotting. “What do you want?”

“A demon’s bell.”

He eyes me. “We don’t—”

“You do,” I say firmly.

The bartender snorts. “You’re too young to be messing with the—”

I slam my palms onto the counter and lean forward so he can see my glowing eyes. “Tell me I’m too young again,” I snap.

"So, your eyes glow." He grunts a scoff.

“You know why?”

“I don’t give a—”

“I’m cursed,” I say firmly, “and if you don’t want to be cursed too —”

“Yeah, yeah. They don’t like that,” he warns.

“I don’t like that,” I mumble.

The bartender sighs and heads to the back. After a moment, he comes back with a black, two-sided candle. All kinds of runes have been etched into it, those etchings dark with dried blood.

“You know the drill?” the bartender asks.

I'm already grabbing the candle from his grasp. With a nod, I head to a booth. My hands hardly tremble as I light both ends of the candle.

“Zaun,” I mumble.

Nothing happens.

The candle’s flames burn hotter, brighter, making sweat pour down my face. I’ve never done this before, but it’s pretty straight forward. You just have to be patient—

Zaun sits across from me. His eyes shine brightly in the room, an unsettling shade of purple that somehow doesn’t seem to suit him at all.

“You dare to summon me? Why?” he grumbles. “Do you finally have a plan to take out Ronath? When will the deed be done?”

I clasp my hands on the table, leaning my arms against it as I shift forward. “You don’t want Ronath to be the one to assault the realm of light, huh? Why?” I shift back. “Let me guess. You want to be the one to do that?”

Zaun’s nostrils flare, and he bares his teeth. He looks like a demon then, a perfect demon, the kind that will devour your body, spit out your bones, and let no part of your soul free to flee to Hell or anywhere else.

He jumps onto the table and grabs my shirt, lifting me clear out of my seat. Before I can register what’s happening, we aren’t in the bar anymore. We’re in a clearing somewhere, and Zaun shoves me aside. There’s not a lot of force in the move, yet I’m flung backward, and my

back slams into a tree.

The demon is beside me in an instant, lifting me back up again, his fist cocked back like he wants to physically pulverize me instead of use magic against me, but slowly, he lowers his arm, and he leaves me be, walking away from me.

“Have you ever heard of the pack Darkfury?” Zaun asks me without turning to face me. He doesn’t even turn his face to the side to talk over his shoulder.

“No. Should I have?”

“Yes, you should have.” Zaun marches farther away before halting. He’s clear on the other side of the clearing, as if he wants as much space between us as possible.

“Well, what about them? Are they another pack you wanted all dead? A pack that you resurrected? A pack that has undying loyalty to you, just like you want from the Alines?”

"You're a fool," Zaun hisses. He faces me, and his expression is one of unbridled anger. "The Alines had once been known as Darkfury."

I gape at him. “How would you know that? Why wouldn’t anyone have told me—”

“The Darkfury had been known to go after evil paranormal creatures,” Zaun continues as if I said nothing.

“You mean like HEX Unite?” I ask.

“Perhaps those who founded HEX Unite got the idea from the Darkfury pack,” Zaun says idly.

"So, they were a precursor to it?"

“In a sense, I suppose, but over time, the Darkfuries became rather one-dimensional. They started to target more and more demons.”

I swallow hard. Is all of this a ploy to get back at the Alines, at the Darkfuries? Have I been tricked all along?

But the potion…

I am so utterly confused.

“What do you think the demons did as a result of the Darkfuries and their attacks?” Zaun asks.

I say nothing, figuring the demon will just tell me.

Only Zaun eyes me with his strange purple eyes, and for a demon, he seems to have a remarkable sense of patience.

Finally, I mumble, “They must’ve hunted the Darkfuries down. That must be why they changed the name of the pack.”

“Yes! The demons slaughtered the Darkfuries to the point of their being near extinction, and yes, they changed their pack name to try to avoid detection. Now, generations later, they have forgotten their purpose.”

“Why are you telling me all of this?” I blurt out. “What do you hope to gain? What do you want me to do?”

“I want you to make good on our deal,” Zaun spits out.

“You want me to kill Ronath, and in exchange, you’ll bring back the Alines.” I swallow hard. “The Darkfuries. You want the Darkfuries back.”

“I want the Darkfuries to rise up again,” Zaun says firmly.

My head is spinning. I’m so shocked, though, that I’m rendered speechless.

“Think about it,” Zaun says as he stalks toward me as if I’m his prey. “You can help to bring back your pack. You can start to right all kinds of wrongs. You can make the world a better place. How does that sound, Robb?”

“I…” I can hardly make a sound.

“You have much to atone for, don’t you?” Zaun presses.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I swallow hard. Why is my mouth so dry?

“You don’t? You killed Dural.”

“It was—”

“Self-defense? You initiated that fight. And what about Collin?”

The blood in my veins turns ice cold, and I suppress a shudder. “What about him?”

“Your alpha. I sensed his life before I left you, but he’s dead now, long since dead.”

“I… I didn’t realize…”

“You can’t lie to me, boy,” Zaun says gruffly.

“I…” Once again, he’s rendered me speechless. I feel so very small and insignificant compared to him.

“You may think that you can change the world,” Zaun murmurs, “but you can’t. Not by yourself. With your pack, however…”

I rub my throat and drop my gaze to the ground. Where am I? I don’t mean this clearing. I mean, where am I? In the final days of my life? How did I get here? Yes, the demon teleported me here, but the course of my life, how did it bring me to this particular place and time? When I think I might have to kill a demon…

Or two?

My body shivers, and I rub my arms.

“With your pack, you might be able to change the world,” Zaun says smugly.

“Change the world how you see fit, you mean,” I snap.

The words are out of my mouth before I can even think if they’re ill-advised, but Zaun only smiles.

"I'm telling you this about your pack so that you can have the motivation you need to do this task I've set before you. Kill Ronath. One demon. Make your Darkfury ancestors proud. Kill a demon, and they will all come back. Isn't that what you want? To see your mom

again? Your dad? What of your brother? You can have your family and your pack back." Zaun lifts his chin. "Maybe I'll forget to bring back Collin. What then? Your pack will need a new alpha. Who better than the one who killed him? That is what happened, isn't it?"

I gape at the demon, who gives me a chilling smile that makes my skin crawl.

“Oh, I know most everything,” the demon says airily, “so you better get to work and soon. That potion you drank? It’s a slow-acting poison. I’ll give you the antidote after I resurrect your family, but you are on a shorter timeline now. One month, Robb, and don’t think you can go back to Mystic Twilight. That will interact with the poison and kill you on the spot.” His grin returns. “Don’t doubt me. Not all demons are liars.”

With that, he claps his hands, and suddenly, I find myself back in my room. The cat swats a paw in her sleep from her perch on the windowsill before settling.

Slowly, I sit on the edge of my bed. How can it be that Zaun wants the Darkfuries back again? To rise up?

I don’t trust Zaun. He’s a demon, so why would he want the descendants of demon killers to rise again? Something doesn’t add up, and I have a feeling that I’m going to want to solve this mystery before I make any kind of a move.

The issue? Time. I might not have time to solve the mystery and to kill Ronath.

I might very well die, and if Zaun wants to, he could resurrect the rest of my pack. He could have their loyalty, and maybe instead of having the Darkfuries kill evil paranormal creatures, what if Zaun really does want to assault the realm of light? He might have my pack go forth and hunt and slaughter angels.

No. I won’t let that happen!

Mrs. Shade is doing research to uncover what her husband is up to. I need to do the same with Zaun.

And maybe Dural too. What did Collin want from Dural? It can’t possibly have anything to do with the history of the Aline pack, can it?

What if Collin wanted to gain access to weapons to kill demons? What if Dural promised them and then reneged on that? If Dural somehow uncovered that the Alines were the Darkfuries, that could explain why he wanted to slaughter us all to be elevated in the eyes of a demon.

Collin might’ve wanted to bring our pack back to greatness.

And I let him die.

I need to make sure that I don’t allow Zaun to control the pack.

Which means I have to hope Mrs. Shade finds something terrible

enough about her husband that she and her daughter will help me to end Ronath.

As much as I want to cut ties with Zaun, I need him. Yes, it's evil, demonic even, to use people, but Zaun wants to use me, and I'll use him.

I'll get my pack back, and then, we'll continue what we started.

We'll rid the world of evil paranormal creatures.

Starting with Zaun.

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Chapter 11

Bellanore

Unfortunately, it takes time to train.

It also takes time to gather evidence, especially when you're trying to avoid detection by a demon that is said to be one of the most powerful ever to exist.

All that means is that three weeks have passed, our second year has ended, and the break between our second and third year has begun.

During that time, I've come to push myself as hard as I possibly can. Day and night, I train. Nothing else matters, not my classes, just this.

Training for life.

Training for whatever comes next.

All I want is to be ready for anything. I'll be prepared for the future and whatever comes my way.

I can transform into the Inland Taipan, the most venomous snake in the world. If untreated, those I bite will die in less than an hour. My snake is a dark tan color, my eyes blackish brown, no rim around the pupil. My scales are smooth, almost glossy, and I look rather elegant, if you ask me. My length is six feet, and my fangs are a quarter-inch long.

I've also done a lot of research to uncover other venomous and poisonous animals, mastering turning into them, so their toxins become my own from tree frogs to spiders. All I can do to become as dangerous as possible.

Right now, though, all I want to do is to try to see if I can turn into something else, something not quite so human or animal.

Like a… sword.

My eyes close. It's late at night. I'm in the cave with Robb, but he's fallen asleep with the cat on his lap. The cat refuses to tell us her name, though, but that's all right. I can't imagine life without her. She also won't tell us about her witch, her name or how she died, but maybe she'll tell us when she's ready.

In my mind, I picture a sword with a sharp tip and a strong, solid hilt. Then, I see it in my mind's eye. I can picture everything about the sword.

Slowly, I can feel my body begin to shift. I'm shrinking, coming together, forging the hilt first. My eyes fly open, and I freak out at the sight, and my legs reappear. They're as stiff as a blade, and I fall down hard, scraping my palms on the rocky ground.

Robb stirs. "What's going on?" he murmurs.

With a sigh, I sit down and rub my palms. "Nothing," I grumble, annoyed at my failure.

I need to go all in, but changing into an inanimate object terrifies me. I have my mind and my magic and my wits about me when I turn into any animal. As a sword, will I still have my mind?

"Go back to sleep," I urge in a gentler tone.

"I'm fine." He sits up straighter, watching, mindful of the cat.

"You know I hate it when you watch," I mumble.

"You're amazing when you use your magic."

I laugh. "Compliments aren't what I'm fishing for."

"Fishing for what?"

I grimace. "Power," I mutter.

"What's wrong with that?"

"Demons have a thing for power," I remind him. "They have some. They want more, crave more, demand more…"

"You aren't a full demon," he protests. "You know your limits."

"The whole point of this exercise is to push me beyond my limits," I remind him.

I reach my hands behind me so I can lean back, and my already-scraped palm lands on a hard rock. Muttering to myself, I pick up the rock, toss it into my hand a few times, and then throw it at the wall.

Robb watches in silence.

A rock…

It doesn't have a mind, just like a sword doesn't, but for some reason, a rock seems easier to consider, and I close my eyes, curling my body into a ball, and imagine myself as a rock until I can see myself in my mind's eye as a rock.

It's terrifying, the realization that I don't have eyes, that I can't see myself, but I have my mind, and I try to shimmy and shake a little, and then I feel myself being lifted into the air. I'm scared all over again until I recognize the hands.

"Can you hear me?" Robb asks. He sounds beyond amazed.

I quickly change back to myself, which causes Robb to fall down because he was holding me as a rock or maybe a boulder—I'm not sure of my size. He hadn't been ready to hold all of me.

With a laugh, I scramble off Robb and haul him up to his feet.

“Did you see that?” I ask.

Robb grins. “That was…”

“Incredible!” I pump my fist into the air.

“Are you sure about that?” he asks. “To me, that would be kind of…”

“Kind of what?”

“Unsettling.”

“A little, but the more I do it, the better it can be. I can try to be a sword again. A dagger. Oh! I could become poison!”

“You want to be ingested?” he asks dryly.

“Ew. No. Never mind.” But I giggle, delirious. “I can become anything I want!”

Anything…

And maybe anyone too.

~

It’s not until tomorrow that I have my chance. The cat has stayed in the cave. Robb’s off sleeping in his bed, and I go to the cave, only I don’t go as myself.

I wear some of Robb’s clothes, and I’m wearing his skin. Not literally, of course. I just transform myself to look like him, and I’m hoping that using his clothes will help to make me smell like him.

The cat walks right up to me. “I thought you would be sleeping now.”

“What are you doing here?” I ask, impersonating Robb’s voice. To my ears, I sound just like him. Robb’s said before that my impersonations are spot on, but can I fool the cat?

"I notice that there are a few more rats here." The cat licks her lips.

“You… eat rats?”

“You know that. You saw me! You think I just go around slurping tails?”

“How about you slurp spaghetti instead?”

“You make a huge mess when you eat spaghetti.”

“I do?” I grin.

The cat cocks her head to the side, appraising me.

“What is it?” I ask, trying not to be nervous.

“Just wondering.”

“Wondering what?”

“How to keep the rats from taking over this cave. Don’t get me wrong. I like your room and all, but sometimes, a cat needs space.”

I grin. “You do what you gotta do.”

And I am so going to take that advice.

~

Ever since Mom came to see me, we've been talking every day. It took me a bit to ask her why she finally came to see me, to set the record straight.

"I had Draz under your father's thumb for years, since before I left. I wanted to keep an eye on him, and I also wanted the imp to watch over you too. I never truly left you alone. Not truly."

She sounded so desperate as she said that, and I know that she loves me, that she never stopped.

And a part of her still loves Dad now too despite everything he might do, maybe has already done or at least started.

"When Draz didn't come back, I was afraid he had died, and if he had, I knew that meant your father must have started to turn into that demon the witch spoke of. I had to see you. I had to tell you everything. Maybe I should've years ago, but you were young, and I didn't want to influence you."

"You wanted Dad to have some love in his life."

"And for that, the world may pay."

That conversation has replayed in my mind ever since, and it does right now as I slip inside the home Mom, Dad, and I used to live in. Mom has moved back in since we reconnected, and I swipe one of her dresses. I'm borrowing it, not stealing. I'll return it.

A quick spray of Mom's perfume and I'm off.

It's time to pay Dad a visit. Mom's quest to find answers has netted little results yet, and she's considered going to see him herself, but she's fearful that seeing him will exacerbate the issue. Maybe it will, but you have to be willing to go all in. You have to be a fighter, and you have to strike first.

That's what Dad would do.

I stand outside the house Dad and I used to live in, and I can clearly see him through the window. He's sitting at the table, much like he was before, and it's almost eerie and unsettling. It's as if he was waiting for me then as he's waiting for me now. Only some demons can read the stars. As far as I know, Dad can't, and I've been wondering if Zaun can.

Maybe I'm wrong, though. Maybe Dad lied, and he can read the stars.

Maybe he knew I'm coming.

That Mom is coming.

He won't realize it's me.

With a deep breath, I march up to the door and knock.

No answer.

I knock again, wait, and then open the door.

“Really, Ronath, is this how you greet your wife after… How long has it been?”

Dad slowly lowers his tablet and robotically stands. He turns toward me, looks me up and down, and then smirks.

“Not bad, Bellanore.”

I tilt my head to the side. “Are you blind? Has that much time passed that you can’t—”

“I’m very pleased. You took to heart my advice, and you’ve been training. You might have fooled your grandmother with this.”

I swallow hard. “How did you know?” I ask begrudgingly, not wanting to admit that he’s right but also not seeing a point in lying.

“Now, how about you walk through fire?” Dad asks. “That seemed to bother you a great deal.”

I clear my throat. “Where do you want me to do it?”

Dad snaps his fingers, and we’re teleported to a field. It’s mostly dry here, hardly any grass at all.

Dad just teleported me without touching me.

His power is insane.

I rub my hands on Mom’s dress. I’ve dropped her appearance, but I opted to keep wearing her dress instead of changing into my own clothes. Maybe I want to feel like a part of Mom is here with me. I don’t know, but I’m frightened.

Fire terrifies me.

Some people say that people’s phobias stem from past lives. Others claim that it’s because we know how we’re going to die somehow, so we’re afraid.

I do *not* want fire to end me.

Trying to calm myself, I rub the spot where I accidentally burned myself years and years ago.

Dad claps his hands, and a path of fire starts. It's not a normal fire. It's a wall of it, reaching higher than my head.

“Go on now,” Dad says soothingly, as if he’s inviting me to jump into a pool. “Walk through fire.”

“Of course,” I say smoothly even though the fumes from the fire is already getting to me.

I suppress a cough as I slide into position to stand before the fire. Then, I turn to Dad and give him a smile.

No, I’m not stalling at all.

I lift a foot, and then, I center myself and recall everything I learned from my weather immunity class as well as tips from Robb, who is a master at this. The fire shifts away from me so that it doesn't touch me, but it's close enough that sparks land on me anyhow. I'm walking through the fire without the fire actually touching me.

Yes, it's technically cheating, and I don't breathe the entire time I'm making that long, terrible trek. Once I finish, I exhale and nearly drop to the ground.

But Dad is there, wrapping an arm around me, giving me a one-armed hug. He doesn't realize. He doesn't know I cheated, that I didn't let the fire touch me.

I grin at Dad as he goes on and on about how he knew I could do it, that he knew I just needed a push.

Whatever he wants, I'll do it. If that's the price I have to pay in order to know what he's up to, fine. I'll butter him up.

"Am I ready yet, Dad, do you think?" I ask.

"Hmm." He rubs his chin with his free hand, still hugging me. "I might have a few more tasks for you to do to prove your worth."

I snort. "I'm your daughter. Doesn't that prove my worth enough?"

"There are things that are thicker than blood, my dear, but don't you worry. When the time comes, you'll be ready."

Oh, how I don't like the sound of that.

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Chapter 12

Robb

When I wake, somehow, I just know everything is different.

And that's exactly the case.

Both Moonstone and Blood Stone Academies have been shut down. Most of the students are engaged in a brawl to the death, and I feel like I'm a chicken with its head cut off.

There has to be a connection to Ronath, to Zaun, to some kind of demon.

That's what Wyatt and the other former bullies thought, that the growing animosity and hostility between werewolves and vampires have been fanned by a demon or multiple demons. It's why they hated Bellanore, just because of who her father is. As if she had a say in the matter.

I'm not on the academy grounds. I'm not even sure where exactly I am, but the smell of the blood, the shouting, the growls, the howls… the battle scents and sounds drive me forward until I'm in the thick of it with fighting and death all around me.

The more bodies I see, the more disgusted I become. I try to stop the fights, to question the combatants. They want nothing to do with me, and they're insane. It's as if they're possessed and have no minds of their own, as if they have no choice but to fight.

And who can possess people?

Demons.

Bellanore. I'm not sure where she is, and I try to call her as I skitter around two werewolves fighting a vampire. At least I don't see painted claws. No poison this time around.

Speaking of poison, up ahead, I see Nia. She's just killed a vampire, and she wipes a hand along her chin, leaving behind a streak of blood on her face.

Her gaze meets mine, and she grits her teeth.

I march right up to her. "What do you think you're doing?" I demand. "Did you cause all this?"

"No," she spits out, "but you better not try to stop me. Every

vampire needs to die."

"Why?" I demand. "Why do they need to die."

"Because!"

"Oh, well, yes, of course. Because. What an answer."

She grips my throat. "Don't you dare mock me! You have no idea what I've been through!"

"No, I don't." It's not easy to get the words out. She has a fierce hold on my throat. "Why do you hate everyone so much?"

"I don't hate everyone," she mutters as she releases me and takes a step back.

"Don't you? You sure seem that way. Or is it that you just hate every vampire?"

Her nostrils flare, and her fingers turn into claws before reverting back.

"Ah, so that's what it is. You want all the vampires to die."

"Fine! You want my life's story? I'll tell you. My dad had been killed by a vampire. Lucky me, right? As if that's not bad enough, that act made the alpha think of me as weak. You want to know what the alpha of the Forge pack does to those he thinks are weak? He abuses them, and I have the scars to prove it."

"Nia…"

She has her claws again, and she cuts through her sleeve, ripping off the material. Scars and burn marks line the arm. She goes to do the same to the other side, but I grab her arm.

"You don't need to—"

"No! You think you have the right to judge me just because I think differently than you do. No, Robb. Those who hurt me, I hurt back. I fight back."

"You've fought your alpha?" I can't help asking.

She smirks. "When he sees what I've done, when he knows how many vampires I've killed, he will not see me as weak anymore."

"You aren't weak, Nia, and you don't have to prove yourself to him or anyone else."

"That's where you're wrong." She jerks her chin up. "Who gave you that scar? Did you pay him back in kind? Scar him? Fight back? Kill him?"

I say nothing.

"Hmm. So it's all right for you to do whatever it is that you want, but for me… I have to play by different rules?" She laughs slightly. "I bet you don't even know the half of it."

"Half of what?"

"It's not just here that werewolves and vampires are fighting. It's happening all across the globe. It's time for werewolves to stand up to our enemy and vanquish them entirely. Vampires are a blight. They're

a cancer, a sickness. The world will be a much better place without them in it."

"Not all vampires—"

"Not all vampires what?" Nia grins and touches along my neck with her finger. "Be careful with your next words, Robb. I'm not in a forgiving mood."

"Mindlessly killing vampires—"

"No. Finish your statement. Not all vampires what?" She presses her nail into the side of my neck, only it's not her nail. It's the tip of her claw.

"Not all vampires are evil."

"They survive on human blood. We used to need to drink blood too, back when we were first created, born, what have you. But now? Now, we don't. We used to need to eat flesh, but we don't need that either. We changed for the better. Vampires? They haven't changed at all, not one little bit. They can't evolve or adapt. That alone means they're against nature. Why should they be allowed to wander the Earth and kill and do whatever they wish? The answer is simple. That shouldn't be allowed."

"They're people just like you and me," I protest. "Bellanore has a vampire for a cousin. Romelia. She's—"

Nia's bitter laugh cuts me off. "A demonic vampire. A so-called living vampire. Do you honestly think that a vampire who has a demon for a father is going to be capable of goodness? Of love? Of—"

"I don't think it's possible for certain werewolves to feel love."

Her teeth flash, her canines gleaming in the firelight. Yes, somewhere nearby, there's a fire. I've been so consumed by our conversation that I didn't realize I've been smelling fire. It's beyond unnerving to realize how out of sync I am with the world around me.

"Are you trying to say that I don't know love?" Nia asks in a low hiss. "Maybe I don't. Maybe my love has all turned to hate because the thing is, my mom knows about the abuse, but she doesn't care, and the alpha? Does he consider my mom weak because of what her husband did? That he died from a vampire's bite? No. My mom's not to blame, but me? I'm a descendant of that weak werewolf, so I'm weak too."

"Do you realize that if you continue this course, you could very well receive a vampire bite?" I ask.

She bursts out laughing and lifts her shirt. On her hip is a wound that's mostly healed, but I can see the fang marks.

"Already survived it," she snaps.

"A vampire still might kill you."

"Not going to happen," she says coolly. "I know what I'm doing, and I know my purpose in life. Do you? Can you say that?"

“I know that I’m not going to become so dark and twisted that I might as well become a demon in wolf clothing.”

“Oh, aren’t you funny?” she mocks, holding her clasped hands beneath her chin. “I’m no demon.”

“No?”

“*Vampires* are—”

“Werewolves can be too. You don’t have to be born a demon.”

“Oh, dear. And here I thought you might be attracted to me if you think I’m part-demon.” She smirks.

“My feelings for Bellanore aren’t your concern.”

“And you want to know what isn’t your concern? Me and what I do.”

“Nia, I never thought that I would say this, but I’m worried about you.”

“You don’t need to be. You two saw fit to run me out of the academy, and that’s on your hands. The new scars I have? You two might have given them to me instead of the alpha. But go ahead, think your girlfriend is a perfect princess. I’ve heard she’s made nice with Wyatt and them, the cowards. They might have accepted her, but maybe they shouldn’t have. She’s as evil as they come. She’s as evil as the alpha, and there’s nothing you can say that will make me think differently.”

Nia stares me down, waiting for me to say something, but all I can hear are two words echoing in my mind.

The alpha.

She keeps saying the alpha.

Not my alpha.

She really is ready to leave her pack if given a chance to, but any pack that she enters will have to accept her anger, her hatred, her toxic nature.

Evil isn’t born.

It’s made.

I could very well have turned evil because of everything I’ve gone through. By the moons, I allowed Collin to die, and I killed the drow. I’m contemplating killing again, and as much as I can try to claim it’s to prevent a demon from becoming too powerful and terrible, but it would also be to save my own hide.

But I met Bellanore. She loves me, and I love her. I’m not supposed to feel anything. Lone wolves have their feelings shut off, but I feel. I love.

And I will not turn to evil.

I will rise above.

But I’m only able to because of Bellanore, because of the support she’s given me.

Nia has none of that support. Is it any wonder that she's been driven to this point?

No.

"Nia, please," I beg. "Mindlessly killing vampires won't help you any. The alpha won't stop abusing you."

"You don't know the alpha and what he's capable of, but the thing is…" She grins. "You and he both don't know what I'm capable of either."

With that, she falls down onto all fours, turns into her wolf, and races away, out of sight within seconds.

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Chapter 13

Bellanore

"Burn the tree," my dad commands.

I swallow hard. Fire is still something I have issues with. I've been tolerating it as best as I can, but pyrokinesis? That's hard. I have been able to manipulate fire that's already been burning, but to create it out of nothing with only magic? That's something else entirely.

I hum a little tune.

"You need to concentrate," Dad admonishes.

"I'm trying to," I assure him.

"Then why are you humming?"

I can't help grinning. "There are songs about sparks and fires and all that jazz."

He grunts. "I'm sure there is, but you aren't Adelle. How about you just set the fires instead of singing about them?"

"I could start singing Billy Joel," I joke.

"The whole point is that I *want* you to start the fire."

"I know. I will."

"How about now?" He crosses his arms.

"I'm just wondering why you want that particular tree burned down. Why not a different one?"

"If your command of fire is mastery level, you can burn a bush without the bush going up in flames," he retorts. "I'm just wondering why you're stalling. You already walked through fire. This should be a piece of cake."

"Mmm. Cake. Do I get some cake after I do this?"

"You'll get nothing and like it if you don't set that tree on fire."

Fire.

Heat.

Spark.

Smoldering.

Intense heat.

There's more to it, something far more real world than just magic. Science.

Pyrokinesis works because I'm able to magically generate enough energy to burst an object into flames. It's all about energy. Concentrated energy. A ball of energy.

Energy with heat.

Abruptly, there's a ball of fire in my hands, touching my skin, burning my palm. With a yelp, I throw the fireball at the tree.

Dad watches me, amused as I gape down at my hand. The palm is red-hot, but there's no burn mark, yet I can still feel the heat of the fire still on my palm.

"You did it," Dad says. "Finally, you're showing some real progress."

"Seriously, Dad? I've done everything you asked for, jumped through every hoop, and I'm just making progress?"

"Yes," he says.

"But—"

"Rome wasn't built in a day."

"Rome was burned to the ground," I mumbled.

"Not in a single night."

"A week, right? I've been training with you for a week. Aren't I everything you could've asked for?"

"You are," Dad says, and there's pride in his voice and love in his eyes.

I shut my own eyes and force myself not to feel, not to react. Dad loves me.

And because of that love, he thinks he can do whatever he wants.

Why? Why is it that he can twist and distort that love and allow himself to become so very utterly twisted and distorted himself that he's a demon and a demon only? No longer capable of expressing love in a way that is healthy? No longer capable of reason?

No matter how much we've been training together, he still doesn't give me anything, no details. I've been prying all along without asking outright, hoping he'll trust me. Don't love and trust go hand-in-hand? One would think so, but that doesn't seem to be the case.

"If I'm all you've asked for, then don't you think you can tell me what you want out of life?" I ask.

"All I want is what everyone else wants," he says, which doesn't explain one accursed thing.

"I'm not sure you and I want the same things out of life," I say dryly.

"Are you so certain about that? You want love and acceptance."

"You have love," I protest.

"You love me," he says.

I want to say that Mom loves him still, but that won't help matters. If anything, that might serve to make matters worse.

And that's what makes me question the prophecy all the more. Doesn't it make far more sense that the *absence* of love be the reason for a demon to turn, well, demonic? Not love itself?

"My love isn't enough?" I ask, endeavoring to keep my tone light and airy, completely non-judgmental.

He says nothing.

And that's when I start to realize it.

"You don't just want love and acceptance. You want love and acceptance and respect and wealth and power and… and… and…" I throw up my hands in the air. "You want more and more and more."

"Don't most people? You want love. You found it with that cursed werewolf."

I stare at Dad without blinking.

"Are you going to deny that you want him saved?" Dad asks.

My palms are covered in sweat, and my mouth is uncomfortably dry.

"You want to train because you want power and strength. You want to become the best that you can be. Deep down, you want more love, more of this, more of that. You and I are far more alike than you would care to think."

"You…"

"I know about your boyfriend, yes. Why haven't you brought him around to see me yet?"

"How do you know he's cursed?"

"My child, do you take me for a fool? You asked about a witch but only after asking about a necromancer."

I swallow hard. Somehow, Dad has learned far too much. What else does he know? We've gotten next to nowhere with him! How can it be that he's uncovered so very much right under our noses!

"Maybe we aren't as close as all that," I mumble.

"Hmm. Has your mother met him?"

I still. This is the first time in an age that Dad has brought up Mom.

How much does Dad know? Is he trying to see if I'll lie to him?

"Mom?" I ask. I roll my eyes. "Do you think she cares about Robb?"

"Robb? So that's his name. What's his pack?"

I bristle. "I told you. We aren't there yet."

"Why?"

I glance away. "He's cursed, right? Until and unless that curse can be lifted, there's no point in it being serious. When it is serious, you'll be the first to know."

"So, you don't love him?" Dad asks shrewdly.

"We haven't said—"

“You don’t have to say the words for love to be involved,” Dad grunts.

I burst out laughing.

“What’s so funny?” Dad snarks.

“Oh, I don’t know. You acting like you know everything about love when there are times when you don’t exactly treat me with love. Oh, and let’s not forget everything between you and—”

“Your mom and I… We have a complicated relationship.”

“You two don’t have a relationship right now,” I point out.

“Because of her doing.”

“And instead of letting go… you’re what? Holding onto hope?”

“Hope.” Dad’s smile is vindictive. “I hope you learn one thing from me if nothing else. Hope is all you need if you want to crush someone. Crush someone’s hope, and you’ll crush them. If you understand your enemy, you can learn their weakness. Exploit the weakness—”

“Dad, exploiting weaknesses? That’s not how—”

“That’s how you win.”

“At what? That’s not how I want to win at life.”

“It is just one way to win, not the only way, but there are times when you will realize that you need to do what is best for you, and what is best for you might mean total annihilation of the other person.”

I hesitate. “Dad, have you ever totally annihilated anyone?”

“Of course.”

“How?”

He blinks a few times, and I have to admit that I’m shocked too. I intended to ask *who*, but how is a legit question too.

“Death,” Dad says shortly, leaving me to believe that’s the truth. The barest traces of the truth, though, without any kind of necessary details.

“Have you ever annihilated someone through something other than death?” I venture.

“Yes.”

“Who have you done this to?”

“You don’t need to know all of the details of my long life.”

“Ah, so this all happened before I was born.” I hesitate. “Is that right? Have you done this to anyone recently? After… After Mom abandoned us?”

“Are you asking if I’ve destroyed anyone or killed anyone?”

“Either, I guess.”

“You do realize that death is a way of life, don’t you?”

“Yes, but I would like to die a long time from now, preferably in my sleep.”

“Who knows what the future will hold.”

“Yes,” I murmur.

My phone rings, but I ignore it, and I try not to show how upset I am. Dad’s not giving me a lot of details, but it’s still beyond unnerving to know that he’s done things that I don’t approve of.

My mind races, and I try to think of something else to talk about when my phone rings again. I grimace and yank it out of my pocket to see that Ellamaria is calling.

“What’s going on?” I ask her.

“Are you okay? Where are you?”

The desperation in her voice makes my heart skip a beat. “I’m fine. Why?”

“Are you safe?”

I glance at my dad. “Yeah…”

“Do you know what’s going on?” she asks, her tone still dire.

“No,” I say slowly.

“The werewolves and vampires.”

“Fighting again?”

“Yes.”

“You’re safe, aren’t you?” I ask.

“Yes, but, Bellanore… it’s bad.”

“Students?”

“Not just students. It’s everywhere.”

I stare at my dad in horror. “Worldwide?”

“Yes.”

“How is that possible?”

“I don’t know,” she mumbles.

My phone beeps, and I glance at the screen to see that it's Mindy calling. Mindy Spark, one of the werewolves who used to bully me for having a demon for a dad. We've had a truce for a little while now, but this is the first time she's calling me.

“I have to go,” I tell Ellamaria. “You stay safe and be careful.”

“You too.”

I hang up and answer Mindy. Dad just stands by with his arms crossed, a smirk on his face.

“What is it, Mindy?” I ask, my tone a little sharper than necessary.

“You can’t tell me a demon hasn’t had a hand in this,” she snaps. “You need to do what you gotta do and find out who is behind all of this because it’s bad, Bellanore. It’s really bad. The vampires are acting as if they’re possessed, and the number of werewolves dying… The Spark pack… Ember pack…”

My heart pounds so loud that it drowns out her words if she says anything.

“What do you want from me?” I finally manage to ask.

“Figure out who has engineered all this and see if you can stop

them. If you need help, I'll come. Just tell me what to do. Until then, I'm going to help the healers as much as I can."

She hangs up.

I wearily rub my forehead. "Dad…"

"Yes, daughter?"

"Do you know what's going on in the world?"

"Chaos? Greed? Violence? A typical day in—"

"More like violence, more violence, death, hatred, war."

"There's war every day—"

"A worldwide war between vampires and werewolves," I state.

"Ah."

He doesn't seem fazed at all. Does that mean that he's involved? Or just not surprised?

"Dad, this kind of affects me. Majorly."

"It only affects you if you want it to. I know you. You aren't ready to go out and fight and kill just yet. It's why I haven't asked you to join me."

"Join you with what?"

"You don't need to know until you're ready."

"You seriously aren't worried at all about the war? What if it exposes us to humans?"

"No, I'm not worried. I have other plans actually," he says.

"Am I finally ready to hear what they are?" I ask even though I'm fairly certain that nothing will change.

"If you must know," Dad says in a voice that is warm and filled with pride yet makes my blood freeze in my veins, "I think of myself as the second coming of the prince of darkness."

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Chapter 14

Bellanore

I gape at my dad. “T-The second coming…”

“Prince of darkness,” Dad says proudly. “There’s no king ever, so I guess that would make you the princess of darkness.”

Princess of darkness. I heard that term so many times before. It was meant to wound me, to hurt me, to paint me as the villain in my bullies’ stories. They sought to cut me down with the term.

Meanwhile, my dad wants to use the term to hold me aloft in the highest esteem for those with darkness in their hearts.

And there’s love shining in his eyes. Love for me. He wants me to join him, to be his counterpart.

He wants me to stand beside him because Mom went and left him. Otherwise, originally, he would’ve wanted her to be the princess of darkness to his prince.

“Prince…” I can barely get the word out. “Dad, are you sure about this? I mean…”

“Don’t tell me you’re worried about me.” Dad’s smirk is wide and playful. “I can handle myself, and you’re well on your way to being able to handle yourself too. I can do this alone if need be, but why not make it a family affair?”

“Dad…”

“You don’t have to say anything. I know you’re worried about that little war. It won’t affect you at all if you don’t let it, though. And your cursed werewolf boyfriend… You might want to handle that one way or another before you can join me. I take it he’s a full-blooded werewolf, isn’t he? That means he can’t join us entirely, but he still would want you to succeed in everything you do, one would think.”

“One would hope,” I murmur.

Dad grins. “Hope can be a good thing.”

“So long as it’s not used against you.”

My mind is racing, and I don’t know if I can hold on much longer. I need to go. If I don’t, I run the risk of Dad realizing that I’m not going to be with him ever.

I glance at my phone just to have something to do and realize that the first phone call had been one from Robb that I didn't answer.

"Speaking of… Robb called. Can I go see him?"

"Very well, but, Bellanore, I do ask one thing of you," Dad says in a tone that brokers no disagreement.

I lift my chin and look him straight in the eyes. "Dad, I know better than to blindly say that I'll do anything for you without knowing what exactly it is that you're asking of me."

"I've taught you well." He smirks before growing serious. "Please, don't get involved in the war. We have our own agenda. That has no bearing on what we will do."

I swallow hard. "I might not have a choice," I say slowly.

"There is always a choice."

I do my best to not glare at him, to not scream that he had a choice, that he could've fought harder to keep Mom by our side. He could've not allowed our love to corrupt him. I mean, seriously, who does that? Love should change a person for the better! How many times did I have to defend my dad and say that demons can love?

But I wasn't wrong because Dad does love me. I can see it in his eyes. He's worried about the war even though he's playing it off. He wants me to be safe.

So I can become a princess of darkness.

That will *never* happen. Not now, not ever.

"Yes," I mumble, "there's always a choice. I can't make you a promise that I'll stay out of the war. It might come to me. If one of my friends is involved, I will do what I can to save them. You know me. You can't expect me to turn my back on my people." I stare him down. "I'm not Mom."

"No," he murmurs. "You aren't your mom."

I hang my head. As much as I know I should leave, I have one last question for him.

"You and Mom…"

"Are you wondering if I love her still, despite everything?" Dad asks.

I nod without saying anything.

"Love," Dad muses. "Hate. Two sides of the same coin. For a demon, the two are very much aligned."

"You love and hate her?"

"I don't think many can blame me," he says gruffly, even a bit sourly.

I nod, awkwardly wave, and teleport out of there. It's up to me to figure out what to do.

When I arrive in the cave, it's empty. So is Robb's room, and I go to call him when my phone buzzes with a text. Mom asked me to

come home right away, that it's urgent.

A bundle of fear makes it impossible for me to teleport, and I have to calm down and focus on my breathing to be able to go.

Mom's pacing in the living room when I arrive. She doesn't stop when I get there. If anything, she speeds up.

"Mom?" I ask timidly. "Did you find something out about Dad? Or is it because of the war?"

"*The* war between werewolves and vampires," Mom mumbles. "You'll never… You need to not join it."

"Funny." I cross my arms as I step in front of the love seat but don't bother to sit down. Mom's anxious energy makes me want to start pacing too. "Dad said the same thing."

"Of course you were with your father," she grumbles.

"Um, yes, that's the whole point, remember? Oh, and you can't be too upset considering Dad's starting to trust me enough to let me know about his grand plan. Want to hear about it?"

"Bellanore, for a few minutes, forget about that."

"Why? What can be more important—Is Ellamaria all right? Everyone in the pack? What about Robb? He called me and…" I fumble to get out my phone from my pocket.

Mom crosses over to me and grabs my hand, preventing me from getting my phone. "Ellamaria, Robb, all of the pack… As far as I know, they're all fine."

"Then what is it?" I demand. Her hands are like ice, and she's holding me far too tightly. The fear in her eyes, the worry in her tone… I've never seen her like this before.

"Sit down," Mom says.

I don't listen, not until she grabs my shoulders and forces me to sit beside her on the love seat.

"Trust me. You'll want to be sitting for this." Mom exhales but doesn't say anything.

"Just spit it out!"

"Your cousin…"

"Romelia?"

"She… She died."

"What?" I jump to my feet. "How? When Because of the war? Did a werewolf—"

"I don't know all of the details, honey, but you mustn't—"

"I mustn't what?" I demand. The call to pace is far too hard to ignore, and I pace so fast that I can feel my feet start to warm up through my boots. "I shouldn't go to her campus? I shouldn't try to find her so I can learn the truth?"

"It's not as if she can tell you the truth about what happened," Mom murmurs. "Please, don't try—"

“I can teleport to her body. I can go and see her, and whoever is with her—”

“Might have been the one to murder her.”

A sob chokes out of me. I might not know her all that well personally, but that doesn’t mean that I want her to be dead.

“She was…” I can’t get the word out, and I don’t want to.

"Of course she was," Mom says softly. "She was too young to die of natural causes. Not that living vampires tend to die of natural causes. It's a hard life they lead… It's a hard life we all live."

“How did you know?” I blurt out. “How did you find out?”

Mom just looks down at the carpet. It’s been vacuumed recently, or maybe the lines on the carpet are from Mom pacing.

All of this feels so very wrong. In so many ways, this is all wrong. Werewolves and vampires hate each other, yes, but that doesn’t have to be the case every day for all of time. We can do better, be better.

Slowly, somehow, my grief at my cousin’s death turns into anger, and my claws dig into my palms. I’m furious.

Furious at my cousin’s murderer.

Furious at my dad.

Furious at Dural.

Furious at Zaun.

And furious at myself.

Most of all, I’m furious at myself. I can’t keep anyone safe. Worse, the entire world is falling apart.

“Mom, Dad wants to one-up Lucifer,” I say calmly, in a voice that doesn’t sound like my own.

Mom stiffens. “What did you—”

“Dad wants to one-up Lucifer,” I repeat in that same tone. “He wants to be the second coming of the prince of darkness, and he wants me to be the princess of darkness.”

Mom grips my shoulders. “You must stay away from him. He’s too far gone—”

“He’s not, not yet. He’s still in the planning phase yet.”

“And what if the last phase is training you, preparing you?” Mom counters. “He’s been talking about that for some time now, hasn’t he? You need to stay away from him. He’s too dangerous—”

“The world is dangerous. Vampires and werewolves all over the globe are killing each other. It’s a bloodbath. My cousin is dead. The world is coming to an end.”

“No,” my mom says gently. “That won’t—”

“What, Mom? How can you say that? How can you be so sure that the world isn’t ending? The humans are going to learn about vampires, about werewolves. They’ll learn that angels and demons are real, that witches are. They’ll go to war with us. How many precious

prophecies have foreseen that war? It will come one day, and then…"

"No one has seen the other side," Mom says.

"Because there is no other side. Magic will be snuffed out of the world. Who knows? Maybe all paranormal creatures, good and evil, and all of the humans will be destroyed in the war. What then? The animals will rule, but there won't be any more shifters. Just the plants and animals, and maybe that's how it should be."

"Bellanore, how can you talk like that?" Mom whispers, horrified.

"Like what?"

"Like you have no hope."

I snort. "Easy. I have no hope."

Mom opens her mouth, but all that comes out is a dramatic sigh.

"Can you imagine?" I laugh, but it's completely without mirth. "Dad tries to be the second coming of the prince of darkness. How do you think Lucifer will react? Oh, he won't stand for that. Not at all. He could very well make an appearance soon, and what then? He alone could usher in that war. Mom…"

"Bellanore, you can't give up hope."

"Hope is worthless," I spit out. "Seriously? Why should I have any? My boyfriend is cursed. He has to kill my dad to survive. I… I should probably help with that. Killing my dad… All because he subverted our love. It's dark and twisted, and Robb… I don't want to lose him, but I also… Dad… I know what he wants is wrong, but he… He cares for me. He loves me. I know he does. He isn't *all* evil."

"It's the rare person to be wholly good or evil," Mom states. "Your father isn't completely evil."

"Lucifer is," I say darkly, "and Dad wants to be his successor."

"He won't succeed."

"You can't be sure—"

"Robb will live."

"Robb." My heart aches, and I can sense him, sense his love, sense his presence. He's right outside the door.

He knocks, and the door swings open. I take one look at my handsome boyfriend, at his grim smile, hair hanging in his eyes, his sky blue eyes that glow with his curse, and I promptly burst into tears.

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Chapter 15

Robb

I've been to Bellanore's home a few times before, and I go there now. I have to see her, and the second our eyes meet, Bellanore starts to cry.

Without thinking, without a word, I hold her, comfort her, rubbing her back. I'm whispering in her ear, but I'm not sure what I'm saying. All I want is for her to know that she isn't alone, that I'm here for her, always.

She clings to me as if she wants me to be a second skin, as if she wants to crawl inside me so that we can become one. I know then that my death would shatter her, and I won't have that.

But will her dad's death shatter her too? I don't think so, but it would still affect her deeply just the same.

My dad was a good man, a family man, and he loved us above all else. Dad treasured Mom, treated her like a queen. My parents worshipped each other. That's not to say they were perfect. When Rickard and I pushed the limits, and we did more times than not, Dad would yell and punish us. Mom would sit us down and try to get us to see right from wrong, and I think it's because she knew she wouldn't always be there for us. She wanted us to have a solid understanding of right and wrong, good and evil.

But good and evil aren't always black and white. The world is filled with gray.

This curse, though, it's entirely black. The deal I have with Zaun is even blacker.

Yet, if I can save my pack, doesn't that mean the deal can't be solely black?

But the deal requires a death.

One death. How many lives saved? Not just that of my pack either.

It's a no-brainer, honestly, the truth we've been sidestepping. I didn't want to kill Ronath from the start because I killed Dural, and I killed Collin. One I don't regret, the other I do.

The bond between an alpha and his pack should be sacred. I disavowed that by not getting Collin to a healer. I could have saved

him. He might have lived.

Instead, I abandoned him. I let him die, watched him take his last breath. I failed him.

If Collin lived, who knows what course my life would've taken. Dural's curse wouldn't have taken effect. So long as Collin or one other pack member survived, I would not have become a lone wolf.

I did this to myself.

All because of anger, rage, hatred.

The trifecta of evil.

I'm not a good person, but I want to be one. That's the difference, but is that enough? Can I atone for my past sins?

Because Collin would be well within his right to strike me down and kill me if I'm able to get Zaun to resurrect my pack, and none should blame Collin for that.

But can the demon do as he claims? Will he even honor the pact we made?

And will I lose my love if I have my family brought back to life? Because my life won't be complete without Bellanore in it.

Maybe Collin killing me is the only way this can turn out for the best for everyone's sake.

"You're scared," Bellanore murmurs.

I have my head resting on hers as I hold her, my eyes closed, but I open them now and draw back to realize she teleported us to the cave.

"I wanted us to be alone right now," she murmurs. "Robb, we need to talk."

"We do, but first, Bellanore, you need to know something."

She grins through her tears. "I already know," she murmurs.

"No, you need to hear it," I say, but she's crying again, and I kiss her tears away, holding her, hoping my actions say the words for me, the words she should hear with her ears, the words she's not ready to hear.

Why isn't she ready to hear them?

"Robb, you mean so very much to me," she murmurs. "I don't want you to leave me."

"I won't," I promise even though the choice might not be mine to make.

"I'm terrified. Dad… It's starting. He's turned to wrath, and he has a desire for destruction. He wants to be… Do you remember what Wyatt and the others used to call me?"

"Princess of Darkness."

She nods.

I gape at her, my hold around her waist tightening. "He wants to be…"

I can't. It's too much. Somehow, someway, he wants to become

Lucifer.

Dimly, I realize I'm on the ground. My heart. It's not beating properly. When I told Bellanore about my timeline, she freaked out. She wanted to go after her dad right then and there.

But her mom convinced us that she wasn't ready, that I wasn't ready.

That we needed more time, that Bellanore needed to go more into her demonic powers.

In a week. That's when we were shooting to go up against her dad.

Now, I might not have that chance. Bellanore might have to face him alone, and alone, she might not have the strength and conviction of will to do it.

Bellanore has her hands on my chest. My heart beats slowly, irregularly, and each beat brings me pain beyond measure, and all I want to do is die.

I can't even see clearly. My vision is all blurred. From tears? From low blood pressure? I can't be sure, but I feel wetness on my face. Bellanore's tears? My own? No, her spit. There's a roaring sound in my ears, but I can just hear that she's shouting, probably yelling at me to stay with her.

I want to. If I can choose, I'll stay.

And then, I can sense it. She's drawing my pain away, taking it into her, and I hate that I'm this weak, that she isn't asking because I would never ask her to do that.

She knows. That's why she isn't asking.

Gradually, my heart starts to beat more regularly, without pain, and Bellanore helps me sit up. Her forehead is covered with the sheen of sweat, and I lean over and kiss her cheek.

"Thank you."

"Aw, isn't this touching."

I blink, and four vampires encircle us.

Bellanore jumps to her feet. Despite her taking away my pain, she's holding herself up far better than I would've expected, but then, adrenaline is very powerful.

I stand too.

The vampires don't say anything else. They descend on us like rabid animals, as if they're dying for a taste of our blood, as if they won't survive without our blood.

My arm comes up to block the first vampire, but a second grabs my other wrist. The other two are converging on Bellanore, and I shove the vampires on me away enough to take a step toward her. Everything in me screams for me to protect her, to save her. I don't care about my own life, only hers.

My life has been forfeit since Dural betrayed the Alines and again

when I allowed Collin to die. My anger had been so utterly stupid. I knew about the curse, and I knew the others had all been killed. Only Collin had a chance to survive, and I watched him die because I didn't want him to live. All because he made a mistake in trusting the wrong person.

Has Bellanore done the same? Has she made a mistake in trusting me?

What of her mom? Had Mrs. Shade made a mistake by trusting that witch's prophecy? Prophecies can be interpreted in so many ways.

How can love cause so much hatred and aversion? How can something inherently good cause so much evil?

Yes, love can turn into obsession, but was that love in the first place? And I don't know Ronath, but from what I've been told, I'm not sure obsession fits.

Well, not toward a person at least. Obsessed with wealth, yes, and now with wrath.

What next? Power? That does seem to be the case.

No, not power. What's next will be war, plain and simple.

That's what war is—simple. Simple madness. Simple destruction. Simple devastation. Death, murder, terrible acts all committed because you disagree with the other side.

The vampires yank my head to the side, treating me like I'm a puppet. I can smell their terrible breath, and yes, Bellanore took my pain away, but my body remains weak. The vampires are far too strong for me, and they're blocking my view of Bellanore. How is she handling herself? Probably better than I am, but what if I'm wrong? What if the blood I smell is hers and not any of the vampires'?

Fear has me struggling against the vampires. I'm wiggling like a worm, trying to break free out of their grasps, and my foot slips on a rock. The vampires don't allow me to fall, though.

The scent of fur has me realizing without seeing that Bellanore's her wolf. Duh. I'm struggling against these vampires, barely able to prevent them from biting me, but I can use my wolf and more easily attack them. Perfect!

Except… I can't call my wolf.

I'm better but not. I can't shift.

How am I supposed to take down a demon, one that is to become one of the most terrible and powerful demons ever, if I can't even take down two vampires?

But there aren't just two vampires against me and two against Bellanore. More vampires have joined us, and I don't see how Bellanore and I can survive.

"Bellanore!" I shout over the struggling.

She howls.

The stench of more blood fills the cave, and I can just see behind the vampires' legs that blood is coating the cave floor.

"Just go!" I tell her, wanting her to teleport away. My life doesn't mean as much as hers.

Silver flashes. Fangs descend. I brace to feel the sharp sting of the bite when the vampire rears back.

Bellanore bit the vampire in question before he could bite me. Blood squirts from his neck, the blood from his victims flowing through his veins? Or is he one of the living vampires?

He drops down to the ground.

One of the living vampires now dead.

The vampires leave me be, descending on Bellanore's wolf, and I try to grab them, to shove them away, to remind them that easier prey is around, but they ignore me, shoving me aside, intent on getting to the one who felled their brethren.

And then, suddenly, the circle of vampires fighting each other to get to Bellanore all back away. In the midst of them is a red-skinned woman with curled horns. Her eyes are sheer fire, and she's strong, stately, sexy. She radiates power in all of its forms. A red tail coils this way and that, the tip a pointed black arrow.

Bellanore.

She's transformed herself into a demoness.

A vampire doesn't seem to realize just what has happened. He rushes at Bellanore, and she grabs him with one hand, her fingers actually fingers with claws for nails. Her other hand punches through his chest, and she rips out his heart. She allows the organ to fall to the ground first before dropping the vampire on top of it.

All she has to do is smile at the rest of the vampires, and they fall over each other in their scramble to use their swift speed to flee, running away from the sheer marvelousness that is Bellanore Shade.

The sight of her, her strength, her power, her might…

Bellanore has amazed me time and again, and I'm amazed once more.

She is strong, fierce, and a force to be reckoned with.

She'll be strong enough to do what I can't.

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Chapter 16

Bellanore

Unleashing my inner demoness is unreal. It feels right in a way that frightens me, but this also feels as if it's been something I should've done a long time ago.

I've never shied away from the duality of my nature. Being a werewolf has always brought me joy, and I can't say that even with the bullying that being a demon has brought me shame. No. I am a werewolf, and I'm a demon, but that doesn't mean I'm good or evil. I'm me.

I'm what I am on the outside and the inside, and I dictate what I am on the inside. Yes, there's a wolf inside me, but there's a demoness too, and I've denied her for too long.

Dad never mentioned the demoness to me. Maybe he doesn't even know that I have this part of me, but it fills me with so much power and knowledge just to take on this form, and I know what I must do.

I also know what I want to do, and that's two different things.

The threat has been banished away. Who knew vampires could be that terrified of a demon? After all, vampires are demonic themselves. But although we're relatively safe now unless the vampires decide to return with reinforcements, I don't bother to reclaim my human form.

My gaze falls on the dead vampires. I killed two of them. Only two. There had been eight of them once the newcomers joined the first ones. Ah, well. I can always kill more next time.

If it's necessary. I hoped that killing one would have been sufficient, and I picked the one that had the most anger and rage in his heart. Maybe that was wrong of me, considering that anger and rage might have been because a werewolf had killed his love or daughter. Living vampires, after all, can produce heirs. Who knows? Maybe that werewolf who killed a family member might have been a demonic werewolf, and that's why he came at me from the start.

Andre. He had died a bit ago, but he had a brother, Chandler. Maybe Chandler had taken up his brother's cause and listened to his demonic father. Or there are other demonic werewolves in the world.

I suppose I'll never know, and I merely have to live with the consequences of my actions.

That's all any of us have to do, although our lives are also colored and challenged by others' actions and their consequences as well.

The most heinous of actions is murder, of course.

I meet Robb's gaze, and I realize I've waited a long moment to do exactly that. Not from fear of his reaction to seeing me like this. No, Robb has always accepted me. Well, not when he first saw me, but then again, we hadn't gotten off to the right start immediately. Once we got to know each other, Robb has only ever shown me trust and love. His acceptance makes it easier for me to continue to accept who and what I am.

And he's staring at me with admiration. He loves me in all of my forms, and I love him all the more for it.

"We can't stay here," I inform Robb.

"I know," he says. "You were incredible."

"You managed to not get bitten."

He grimaces. "I'm not as much of a fighter as I would like to be," he admits, scowling darkly.

"Don't worry."

"Bellanore, you need to know something."

"You wish to confess something? Now? How ironic that you wait until I take on a demon form for you to wish to repent." I smirk and wink at him. "Go ahead. You can tell me anything."

"I let my alpha die."

I nod slowly.

"Which means that I allowed Dural's curse to befall me. If I had brought Collin to a healer… None of this would've happened. We never would've met… Your dad…"

"My dad still would have become what he is. He still would be evil, and I would have been lost without you beside me. I would possibly have been seduced by the darkness my father offers. I might not have cared about the prophecy, and who knows? I might have embraced being the princess of darkness. You, Robb, are my light, but all light casts a shadow. We aren't just one thing. You're strong, intelligent, loyal."

"Not to Collin," he says glumly. "Not to my alpha."

"Your alpha betrayed you. You were hurt, and you had lost your entire world, your family, your pack. At that point, was Collin your alpha? Or was he your enemy?"

"I thought he was in the wrong, but Dural must have tricked Collin from the start. Or maybe… There's something else. The Alines… We used to go by a different name. Generations ago, we were the Darkfuries."

I blink a few times, and my demon form slips away, so I stand before him as myself.

“Darkfuries,” I murmur. “I’ve heard that before, I think.”

“We used to hunt down and kill—”

“Demons,” I breathe. “A pack of werewolves that had been demon killers.”

He winces. “At first, we would hunt down any evil paranormal creatures, but yes, then we turned to demons. Demons, in turn, hunted us down.”

“Naturally. You had to hide away to avoid becoming extinct.”

Robb nods and blows out a breath.

“You’re trembling.” I laugh bitterly. “Did you fear that this would change things between us? I know how you feel. I can sense it. I know how much you…”

Why is it so hard for me to say the word? Love. It’s four letters. So easy to say, yet my lips, tongue, and vocal cords refuse to form the sound of the word.

I know why. Love corrupted my dad. Love isn’t only ever good, and Dad has caused me to second-guess love, to doubt its power to save.

I love Robb, and that frightens me, so I can’t bear myself to admit the feeling aloud, but that doesn’t stop me from feeling it with every fiber of my being.

“Nothing between us has changed,” I finish lamely.

Robb grins. His entire face lights up. It can’t hide the paleness of his complexion, though. His skin is turning a bit ashen again.

I hate Zaun even more than my father. Robb does not deserve the hand that fate has seen fit to deal him. Robb should have so much more going for him.

And he will.

As I stare at Robb, I know what I must do. While in my demon form, I wanted to descend to Hell. I wanted to see Romelia, and I longed to try to help her in any way that I can, but even more so, I need to teleport to Heaven. There, I need to see Robb’s family.

What Robb needs now more than anything, more so than even me, is hope. He needs hope. Without it, he’ll surely succumb to the curse or the poison that accursed demon gave him.

My phone rings, and I remove it from my pocket. It’s Ellamaria.

I answer without saying a word.

"Bellanore? Are you okay? Stay away from your dad. He's… I don't know how to say this, but I think… I had no choice. I had to kill a vampire. He would've killed me otherwise, and just before he died, he said your dad's name. I think… The war is everywhere, Bellanore, everywhere, and it's even caused a few human deaths. A werewolf

turned into a wolf in front of cars in a human city. The drivers freaked out and hit each other, and they all ended up dead from the accident, but it's only a matter of time before they realize that we're real, and you know what that means."

“Stay home, Ellamaria. Do not get involved.”

“How can you expect—”

“Stay home.”

I hang up.

She’ll listen, or she won’t. I can’t help her right now. There’s too much going on. Everything with my dad has to be settled.

If Dad is one of the demons fanning the flames of hatred to spark the war, then Dad’s doing it as a diversion. I’m certain of it. This isn’t Dad’s endgame, and I’m also fairly certain other demons might want this war. Demons crave power, and they plot and plan and lurk in the shadows until they’re ready to emerge.

They’re like cockroaches. Almost impossible to kill, they spawn like crazy, and they fester and turn everything terrible. A house that has cockroaches is a house of misery, of despair.

Or maybe I’m overreacting. I can’t control my emotions right now. It’s as if there’s a storm inside of me, a wall of rage and anger, and I want to lash out.

But it’s also a quiet rage, a gentle anger, if that’s possible. I feel the emotion so much that I could vibrate from the intensity. By the moon, I can even fly from it, but I can control myself at least, even if I can’t control my emotions.

“Come.” I hold out my hand.

Robb takes it, and I mean to teleport us back to my mom's, but Robb embraces me, holding me. His kisses help to soothe my soul, to take away some of the pain I'm feeling, but the moment he banishes away my anger and rage, grief comes rushing in to take its place.

Robb kisses my forehead and then touches his to mine, staring down at me, looking deep into my eyes as if he can see my soul.

“What is it?” he murmurs. “What haven’t you told me?”

“My cousin. Romelia Covenshade. She’s a vampire with a vampire mother and a demon dad. We’re related because of the demon side.”

“Obviously.” Robb grins, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. He knows this is a serious conversation, and he’s being respectful, not mocking.

“She’s dead.”

“Because of the war?”

“I assume so. I don’t know the particulars.”

“Do you need to do something for her?”

I hesitate.

“Can you go to Hell and see her?” he asks.

“Oh, Robb. You amaze me.” I laugh. “I thought about that, but I

can't. I can't save her. At least not right now. Instead, there's someone else I can save, maybe."

"You want to save your dad?" he asks.

"I don't know if that's possible. I wanted to. For so long, that's what I wanted. It's why I never said to you, let's go ahead. Let's take out my dad. Let's end the curse and have Zaun bring back your pack."

"There's no way to know for certain that Zaun will do what he says," Robb adds.

"Oh, Robb, we know he will. Demons can lie, yes, but that potion he gave you… Yes, you just had another heart episode, but that's from the Mystic Twilight abuse. His potion is poison, yes, but Zaun has been incredibly patient for a demon. You were cursed by Dural how long ago? You should've died long before now and would've if not for the Mystic Twilight."

"If Zaun was afraid of my dying before completing the… task," Robb says with a wave of his hand, "then why didn't he give me the potion/poison sooner?"

"He's a demon," I say dryly. "He wanted to feel appreciated, so he waited for you to ask for his help."

Robb grimaces. "I was nearing death," he grumbles. "He could've given it to me before now."

"Remember," I say softly, "Zaun might be able to read the stars and predict the future. He might have seen that you weren't going to act unless pushed and that you would survive with the Mystic Twilight until then."

"He could've had my heart's best interests in mind and given me the potion/poison long ago."

"And maybe you would've tried to go against my dad and failed. Everything happens for a reason."

Robb rubs his forehead. "I… I think I need to lie down."

"Of course." I squeeze his hand, and we teleport back to my mom's.

It doesn't take long at all for Robb to fall asleep in the guest room, and I brush his hair back from his forehead as I watch him sleep.

"I used to do that with your father," Mom says from the doorway.

"Watch him sleep?"

"Yes. He had no cares then, when he was resting."

"He had cares when he was awake?" I ask.

"I wouldn't say he had cares or worries ever. No, your father was very deliberate with everything he did…"

I turn in time to see her lips curl into a smile, her eyes taking on that faraway look of memories.

"When we dated, then he was more spontaneous. When we fell in love, he had no cares at all, no grand designs. Neither of us intended

for it to happen.” Her nostrils flare. “And I certainly never intended for any of this to happen either, but life isn’t a fairy tale.”

“No.” I turn back to Robb, kiss his forehead, and then follow my mom back to the living room. “Do you know any angels?”

“That’s an abrupt change of topic.” Mom glances at me curiously.

“I take that as a no.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Mom.” I embrace her. “Please watch over Robb for me.”

“What are you doing?”

“I need to go.”

“Where?”

“Do you trust me?”

Mom nods.

"Then, please watch over Robb."

“I’ll care for him as if he’s my blood.” Mom squeezes my hand.

I hope with everything in me that they will become related one day, that Robb and I can survive all of this, that we can one day marry.

Until then, we can’t be lovers. We both must be fighters.

Robb needs to be armed with more than just knowledge and weapons.

He needs hope.

And I will find that for him. No matter what it takes.

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Chapter 17

Robb

This is it.

I'm dying.

I've been dying all along, but this is different. I can feel it.

Death is cold, so very cold. It clings to you at all times. You can't get your fingers warm, and you can't take a complete deep breath.

Death lingers like a cloak that oppresses you, steals your breath away.

Death is a torment, a plague, a pox.

It comes for you, and how I envy those that death comes for quickly. This painful, lingering death is nothing more than agony.

I'm in bed, sleeping, and then I somehow can see a vision of the battle, only it's not just one battle. There are battles happening all over the world. My eyes are closed, and yet I see. I can't turn away, and I can't stop watching the horrors.

A vampire decapitates a werewolf.

A vampire has her tongue ripped out.

A werewolf stakes a vampire clear through the chest.

A werewolf steps over a dead vampire with a bloody mouth and stabs another vampire. It takes me a moment to realize the weapon the werewolf used is a fang from the dead vampire.

But there are some who are trying to talk to the others. Peacekeepers.

You can guess what happens to them.

They die, one by one, some even downed by friends.

It's madness. The entire world has gone mad.

Bellanore's cousin died. I'm sure others we know have died too. Maybe Wyatt or Jett or Mindy. They've always been against demons, but that doesn't mean they can rise against demonic influence, and the visions unfolding in front of my closed eyes scream of demonic influence.

Or maybe they're sitting this one out. I can only hope that's the case, given how the peacemakers are being shown violence and more

violence.

And then there's Elliot and Decker. They're the only ones left from the rough crowd.

No, that's not true. Nia's out there. How much of her anger toward the vampires stems from her wanting to slay them all for having killed her father? How much of it is colored by the demons exerting their influence? She doesn't need the demons to kill vampires. She's been trying to kill vampires since year one.

Who knows? Maybe she tried to kill some even before she stepped onto Moonstone Academy soil.

How long have the demons been trying to foster the werewolves all over the world to rise up? Or are the demons going after the vampires instead? Or both sides, I suppose. The vampires, the way they're fighting… It's insane. They're terrifying, and I can't. I just can't handle seeing the devastation they're inflicting upon the werewolves.

If only I could wake up from this living nightmare… but it's not a nightmare. It's real. This is real life. I don't need to be told that these are real, actual events. I know they are.

Why am I witnessing them, though? Is it because the veil between life and death is lowered for me that I can cross over at any time? As such, perhaps I can see where others are dying, other glimpses of spots in the veil where the others are living their fleshly coils behind?

Decker, I'm sure, is one of the peacemakers. He'll be out there, trying to talk down the others, a losing battle if ever this was one. As for Elliot, I don't know if I can trust him. He could very well be one of the ones out there, fighting the vampires, trying to kill them. After all, he tried to during the Red Moon Ball night our first year. Although I made him forget that, he still fought as hard as Roald had. Decker fought too, but Decker has shown all along that he's been willing to change.

No. He wasn't willing to change. He *did* change.

The visions… I have no control over them. As much as I would like to see Decker, Elliot, or any of my friends, I can't. The only solace I can take is that I don't see Bellanore.

She's not fighting vampires, and she's not fighting werewolves to get them to stop.

No. She's engaged in another battle altogether.

War with her father.

I hate to think about what exactly her father is planning because this war… this is as terrible and wicked as can be. If this isn't what her father wants, then what does he want?

To become Lucifer.

The Prince of Darkness.

Assault the realm of light.

What exactly does that mean? Does he want to kill the angels? To overthrow all of them? Does he want to become more than Lucifer?

More than God?

Is that his wish?

That would certainly make him the most terrible and powerful of demons.

And Zaun, what role does he want in all of this? He attacked me when I asked him about wanting to assault the realm of light. Why? Because I'm too close to the truth?

Is Bellanore right? Can Zaun see the future? Does he know that the angels won't fall? That Ronath is doomed to fail? Maybe then the angels will rise up against the demons and do what the Darkfuries couldn't and kill every last demon, including Zaun.

Nothing will motivate anyone, including a demon, more than fighting for their own hide.

Yes, I can see that being the case, of Zaun wanting to avoid a war that will end with his species becoming extinct. Zaun doesn't want Ronath to win. He doesn't want the demon to even start the war. That's why he gave me the potion. Zaun knew that Ronath is getting ever closer to his goal.

Of course, I could be way off base with any of this. My mind is unraveling. I shouldn't be able to see what I'm seeing, and I try not to watch the horrors, to stay trapped in my thoughts, but my thoughts are all dark and twisted and heinous, as terrible as the sights.

As for why Zaun doesn't just kill Ronath himself… if he can see the future, maybe he already knows that he'll die. So he's willing to send me instead.

Or maybe Zaun can't see the future at all, and he isn't willing to make a move against Ronath directly. It could be that Ronath has more allies than Zaun. Not that I think demons can ever truly trust one another.

I don't know. I don't know anything. Despite everything I've been through, I can't understand how the world can be such a dangerous, terrible place. Sometimes, I've heard paranormal creatures complain about the humans and their wars, but honestly, we aren't any better. We're just as violent, if not more so.

All I want is… I want a future. I want my family back, and I want Bellanore in my life. Is that too much to ask for? Why can't I have a better future?

Why can't I have a future at all?

Yes, I've made mistakes. Collin made a mistake in trusting Dural. I still don't know all of the ins and outs of their arrangement, and I might not ever learn it. I won't believe that all drow are evil, though, just like I don't believe all demons must be evil too. I'm capable of

darkness. I've killed when I didn't have to.

And now, I'm paying the price for that.

I hate what my life has become, and I long for days when I can have a full, happy life again.

But that might never happen.

I don't know what Zaun will do if I die here and now without killing Ronath. Will he resurrect my pack and force them to do it? What if they all die too?

Or will Zaun not worry about the Alines at all, figuring it's just as well considering we used to hunt down and kill demons as the Darkfuries?

In that case, my family, my pack will remain in Heaven while I will descend to Hell.

I'll be forever separated from my family. I'll never see Rickard again, never see my parents.

It's what I deserve. Collin… He should have lived. I should have at least gotten him to a healer. Then, if he had died, it wouldn't have been on my soul.

Collin deserved my trust. Knowing what I know about the Darkfuries makes me wonder if that's why he sought out the drow.

Bottom line, Collin was my alpha, and I failed him. I turned my back on him. I should have been there for him until the bitter end.

Then, the curse would have failed.

And then, Zaun might have tried to get us both to take out Ronath. Who knows what might have happened after that point.

But things happened as they did, and maybe they even happened as they should have. Meeting and falling for Bellanore is not a mistake. I will love her even after I die. She is the one for me, and if the only way I could have met her means my family had to die…

What am I saying? That I am willing to have my parents die so I can have a girlfriend? That my brother doesn't need to ever have a girlfriend for himself? I'm terrible. I don't know what I'm thinking. I'm delusional, going crazy.

Is that death? Losing your mind? Losing yourself?

I think so.

My thoughts can no longer keep me preoccupied from the sights before me, not as I watch a werewolf with black hair and green eyes die. She looks like Bellanore, and I know she isn't, but that doesn't stop my heart from failing.

That werewolf had been trying to talk down another werewolf from killing a vampire. The werewolf killed the Bellanore-lookalike. Now, the vampire kills that werewolf.

The peacekeepers aren't able to hold back this rising tide of hate. Peace is being drowned out. It's not enough in the face of this sheer

abhorrence. Nothing we can do will ever be enough.

My body is shivering from the coldness of death. I can feel death itself. Its fingers are like ice, and I just want to stop. Stop shivering. Stop feeling. Stop fighting.

I'm so ready to give up, to give in, to allow this next breath to be my last.

But I can't.

I won't abandon Bellanore.

Her mom came back to her against all odds.

I will too.

Maybe…

Maybe not…

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Chapter 18

Bellanore

When I leave my mom, all I do is teleport to the porch. From there, I close my eyes and try to teleport to Heaven.

Nothing happens.

Which isn't all that surprising. Heaven is a place I've never been to before, and I'm not certain how to get there. You aren't even supposed to go there unless your dead, so maybe there is no way for me to reach it.

Still, I try again and again and again.

And fail again and again and again.

Until I opt to teleport to just outside Heaven.

Then, I'm whisked away through time and space and find myself standing before gates that can only be described as pearly.

Seriously? The Pearly Gates is real?

I reach to touch the gate, to see if it will open, when an angel flies over. He's on the outside, like me, rather than in Heaven.

"What are you doing here, demon?" the angel nearly growls, his voice rough and raspy, as if he's furious to have to talk to someone he hates so very much.

I smile brightly. "I'm only a half-demon," I correct.

"That doesn't matter. You aren't allowed in."

"Just because of who my father is? That's not fair. I had no choice __"

"You can complain about what's fair and what's not elsewhere."

I glare at him and then realize we're suspended in the sky, high up. If I look down, will I plummet like those cartoon characters who only fall once they glance beneath their feet and realize nothing is holding them up?

Cautiously, I shift my feet and realize I'm standing on a cloud, which doesn't make any sense considering that a cloud shouldn't have enough gravity to hold me up. It should lack the strength to hold up much of anything. That's why rain falls, after all. The cloud contains too much moisture and can't hold it all in.

For whatever reason, I'm nervous, very nervous. Because of the way the angel is glaring at me? Because I'm standing on a cloud? Or because I'm so close to Heaven but I'm barred entry? I didn't think anything could scare me more than fire, and I've been way up high before, so I never would've thought heights could bother me like this, but there are heights, and then, there are *heights*.

I don't care what the angel says. I grip the gate. I just want to hold it for balance, and maybe the angel realizes this because he says nothing, just watches me with his purple eyes.

"I'm not here for myself," I explain. "I'm here for Robb. Robb Aline. His family—"

"It doesn't matter why you're here," the angel says stiffly. "You must go."

"Go?"

I stare at the angel, taking in his beauty. Yes, males are called handsome generally, but the angel is beautiful. His features are strong, solid, and his wings are a gold color that shimmers in the sunlight. Hmm. Are we above the sun? I can't tell, mostly because I can't look away. His eyes are unnerving, and I swear he can see to my soul, but I just smile at him, wanting him to be happy, needing him to be happy. Angels shouldn't be so disgruntled and unnerved and upset.

"You must go," the angel repeats. "You aren't wanted here."

"I understand. I know this isn't my place." I hesitate. How can I get him to understand? "This isn't the place for the Alines. Not yet."

"That is not your call."

"It's a matter of when," I blurt out. "When they die, they should come here—"

"They have died. All but one."

"Yes, Robb. His entire pack was killed by—"

"The circumstances of this affects you how?" the angel asks. He doesn't sound bored, but he doesn't sound interested. I can't tell if he knows all about the Alines already or if he just doesn't care.

"It should affect you," I snap. "The souls of those murdered, the souls of those who shouldn't have died yet—"

"Who are you to say when someone should die? If it is the will of __"

"Murder is a grievous crime against nature. You can't abide it!"

"I'm not abiding it, but the souls of those who are righteous are within these gates."

"And I can't ever be righteous because of the blood in my veins even if all I do with my life is nothing but be upstanding and virtuous. I'm doomed either way."

He lifts his chin but neither confirms nor denies my claim.

Again, I smile at him, as brightly as I can. "Which is how you can

know that I'm not here on my behalf. I am here because of—"

"Robb Aline. You said. He isn't destined for here, so I'm afraid that I can't let you know anything at all about them."

"You need to listen to me! Robb has been dealt a terrible hand. The odds are stacked against him and—"

"Why have you come here?" the angel interrupts.

"I want to give Robb hope."

"Hope. Hope that he can be reunited with his family? He seeks to steal souls from Heaven."

"He wishes to be reunited with his family," I spit out, "a family that shouldn't have been murdered in the first place. A family that used to kill demons."

"No. The family did not. The ancestors of that family did."

I throw up my hands. "I'm sure they'll do whatever you ask of them if you allow them to have another chance!"

"Why do they deserve another chance? What about the other souls in here?"

"They've earned their spots in Heaven. They lived their lives—"

"What about the other murder victims in Heaven? The martyrs?"

I close my eyes and count to ten. This angel is the most infuriating man I have ever met.

"Angels are supposed to be patient and good listeners, aren't they?" I ask.

"How trivial a demonic quality whining is," he says.

I gape at him. "Are you seriously mocking me?"

The corners of his lips twitch. "Serious and mocking don't go together."

"You are mocking me!" It takes everything in me not to shout. "You have to hear me out. Robb is a good—"

"I don't have to do anything except what comes to me from a much higher power than you."

My nostrils flare. "I understand," I say as evenly as I can. "Why don't you go and ask—"

"So you can try to find a way through the Pearly Gates? I'm an angel. That doesn't mean I'm naïve."

"I would never." I touch a hand to my chest.

The angel just smirks.

"You think you're so much better than I am just because you're an angel, but you won't even have the decency to listen to me. I'm not trying to trick you. If you'll just hear me out—"

"I don't need to know what you want to say."

"Oh, really? Do you already know everything?"

"No, but I know that there's nothing you can say that will gain you entrance—"

“I don’t need to go inside! I just need—Don’t walk away from me!”

It's not exactly accurate to say that he's walking away from me, considering he's flying. In desperation, I grab his hand. If I can just get him to listen, I know he'll see things my way.

But as soon as I grab his hand, his free hand goes to his sword. He brings the blade up to strike me down, and I place his hand on my temple.

“Seek out the truth in my mind,” I tell him.

And I open up my mind so he can read anything and everything. I block nothing at all so he can finally believe me and see me for who I am, inside and out, and know why I’m here, what I’m after. No secrets.

It's so easy to do this even though it should be utterly terrifying. To trust someone else, a stranger at that, with my every thought? With all of my memories? Everything in my mind? It's unfathomable. He knows my every weakness now.

But I’m willing to take that chance for Robb.

For the desire to have a future with him.

To want to end the prophecy before my dad can hurt anyone else.

Yes, that means I want to fight my dad. Fight. Kill? Maybe. If there’s no other way, then yes, I will do what must be done.

I’m sure the angel will love that.

Finally, the angel returns his sword into his sheath. "I can't let you in, but…"

The angel teleports inside Heaven and then teleports again. When the angel returns. He’s on the other side of the gate. With him is a young werewolf.

Rickard Aline.

Robb’s brother looks so much like him they could be twins if not for the age difference. Oh, and Rickard doesn’t have glowing eyes. I wondered what Robb’s eyes would look like once the curse is broken. Now I know.

“You two can talk,” the angel grumbles, “but not for long.”

“Thank you,” I gush, but the angel is already flying off.

He trusts me enough to let me be unsupervised?

Wow.

“Hi.” I awkwardly wave. “You don’t know me, but—”

“You’re Bellanore Shade,” he says easily. “You don’t know me, but—”

“You’re Rickard Aline.”

He grins. Yes, he so looks like his brother.

Tears burn my eyes. He’s far too young to merely be a soul, to not have his body. He looks physical enough, but when I shift slightly, I can see that he’s translucent.

“How do you know about me?” I ask.

“There’s more than enough to do up here,” Rickard says, “but I like to look down and see what my brother’s up to.”

“You… You’ve been watching us,” I say flatly.

I’m not so sure I like the idea of that.

“Don’t worry. I don’t’ watch when you two kiss.” He shudders. “You’re good for Robb.”

“You think so?”

“I do.”

“You do realize about the curse and my dad and all of that, right?”

“Yes,” Rickard says.

“Do you know why I’m here?”

Rickard hesitates and then shakes his head.

“I want to give Robb peace. Peace of mind. And hope. I want him to have something to hang onto, something to fight for. He’s…”

“He’s not doing well,” Rickard murmurs. “I know. I can sense him. He’s close.”

“Close to Heaven?”

Rickard shakes his head. "He's close to having his soul leave his body."

“Dying.” I shudder. “He can’t die. Not yet.”

“I didn’t think it was my time either, but… We aren’t meant to live forever.”

“But you can come back!” I cry. “Don’t you want to come back?”

“It would mean that you or Robb would have to kill your dad. Do you want that?”

"If my dad is trying to… He wants to assault…" I glance at the Pearly Gates. I can see Rickard and clouds and pink light and all of that, and dimly, I can hear music playing—no, not harps. But I can't see much more than that.

The realm of light has to be Heaven, right? Dad wants to wage war on Heaven.

Wage war on the angels.

He'll want to what… He won't want to free the souls. No, he'll capture them. Not for Hell. For himself. He'll take over Earth with them, and then, Heaven will be his. Earth will be his. Then, he'll go after Hell. By that point, who knows if even Lucifer will be able to stop him.

I stare at Rickard. “Hope,” I tell him desperately. “I need Robb. Without him… I can’t do this without him.”

Rickard slowly nods. “Remind Robb of the cat.”

“The cat?” I ask dumbly.

“The cat.”

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Chapter 19

Robb

I'm sweaty.

I'm clammy.

I have the chills.

A fever.

So many ailments.

The potion must have worn off, or maybe this is the poison part. I don't know much.

But I do know this.

I'm dying.

Mrs. Shade is doing everything she can to try to help me, but it won't matter. It's only a matter of time before the curse finally takes over and drags me down to Hell.

Where I belong.

I failed my family.

I failed my alpha.

Hell is where I'm meant to be.

The door to the guest room opens, and another witch crosses over to me. He wears formal clothes, like he's a professional healer, and I just let him do his thing, lay his hands on me. Mrs. Shade means well, and I know she promised Bellanore she would take care of me, but this is unnecessary. No one can save me at this point.

I'm beyond saving.

The witch murmurs to Mrs. Shade in low tones, but I can't hear what they're saying, and I don't bother to ask them to speak up. It's as if I don't even matter in the course of my own healing… not that there is any healing to be had.

The witch leaves.

Mrs. Shade comes over to the bed. "You need to eat, Robb."

"Not hungry."

She places a hand on my forehead and draws back immediately. "Burning hot," she says in a tone that suggests I really am burning hot and not just really warm like most people mean.

“Worried I’ll set the blankets on fire?” I joke weakly.

“Nothing can spontaneously combust,” she scolds.

“Maybe not, but this wouldn’t be spontaneously combusting. It would be because of the heat I’m generating.”

“You aren’t going to burst into flames.”

“Yeah, I don’t mean to have a fever either.”

“Do you want a bath? I can draw up some water…”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

I shudder. “I’m sure.”

“The cold compresses aren’t helping any,” she protests. “Your body temperature is so high that it can potentially cause brain damage.”

"I'm already brain-damaged."

She blinks a few times.

“It’s a joke,” I mutter.

“It’s a terrible one.”

"No, you see, once, my brother swung the bat as hard as he could. A steel bat. He was young, but still… It hit the back of my head, and I blacked out. I might've had a concussion. I'm not sure. I had a really weak stomach afterward and headaches for a month straight. Ever since, I've said I have brain damage."

“It’s still a terrible joke,” she scolds.

“Maybe, but…” I shrug. “No bath.”

Mrs. Shade purses her lips. She really wants me to shower, I can tell, and she slowly grins, looking so much like her daughter when she does.

Just like when Bellanore wants to tease me.

“You smell,” Mrs. Shade says carefully. “I didn’t want to tell you, but Bellanore might be returning soon and—”

“Mrs. Shade, lying isn’t becoming.”

She grunts. “A bath might be the only way to try to get the fever to come down. Magic isn’t helping any, so we need to try some mundane ways.”

"We don't need to do anything but accept the truth."

“What truth?”

“I’m dying.”

“Well, we’ll just see about that.” She huffs out of the room.

More witches come in then, each one doing a whole lot of nothing. Eventually, Mrs. Shade switches over to asking fairies to come by.

One fairy does, bearing gifts covered in cinnamon.

“Here you go,” Rhonda says. She goes to hand me a bag and then opens it for me. Blindingly fast, she hits my throat to force my mouth open, and she shoves a dough ball into my mouth. “Good?”

I cough and choke on the cinnamon. It’s a bit too dry.

My body starts to shake and tremble, and Rhonda holds down on my shoulders, pinning me in place. Eventually, the fit passes, and she hangs her head.

"When I heard about you being sick, I thought for sure that I could convince the cook to whip you up something that would get you back on your feet again," she murmurs.

"Not with this," I mumble.

"What is it?" she asks.

"Can't you tell?"

She shakes her head.

"You can't sense the dark magic?" the cat mumbles right into my ear.

I can't tell if Rhonda overhears or not. I'm also not sure where the cat came from, but my mind is so very foggy right now. Maybe I'm hallucinating all of this.

"I'm cursed," I tell the fairy.

"Oh, I know that, but… Lots of people are cursed."

"Not cursed like me."

"You…"

I nod.

Rhonda scowls. "No."

I nod again.

"That's not allowed!"

"Not how it works."

"You can't tell me you've accepted this. Where's Bellanore?"

I shrug. I'm exhausted. I've been fighting sleep for fear the visions will return or, worse, that I won't wake up.

Rhonda talks some more, but I can't make out what she's saying. I think she leaves. Another fairy comes in. He talks to me, but I can't bring myself to answer. There's a dull roar in my ears, and I can't make out what he's saying to even know what to say back to him.

The fever is worse now. I can tell that much. I'm shivering so badly that my teeth are clattering, and no matter what I do, I can't control my body. I shake so hard that I'm giving myself bruises.

The cat stays with me, resting on my chest for a time until I recall that's the position Rickard's cat sat on him when they were both dead, and I manage to direct the cat over to the side.

"Trying to give you body heat," the cat grumbles. "You have too big a body for that, though, anyhow."

Another witch comes. She forces me to sit up and gets me to drink something.

I don't mean to, but my body rejects it. Yes, I puke it right back onto her.

She's not deterred, though. She tries a few other potions, but none

of them work either.

This witch is more determined than the others, but eventually, even she gives up.

I hope Mrs. Shade isn't paying the witches because they would all be robbing her. They haven't helped me one lick.

It's sweet of Mrs. Shade to try. She doesn't give up. I can see where Bellanore gets her relentlessness from. It's a great quality, and I hope it serves Bellanore well once I'm long gone.

Am I crying? I can't even tell, but I think something is trickling down my face. My skin doesn't feel like it's my own. Nothing on me feels like me. Talk about an out of body experience.

More and more witches come in and out. More and more fairies in and out. Rhonda comes back a few times. I have no idea if days have passed, but the timeline has to be coming closer and closer to an end.

And it's abundantly clear.

No one can save me.

The curse is here.

And what's worse is that Bellanore hasn't returned.

Her mom leaves to… I don't know. Try to get something else for me to drink? To make some more food I won't eat? To fetch a fresh cloth for my forehead? I'm not sure, and I think I might doze off or something. I'm so feverish that I can't tell what's up and what's down. I almost feel like I'm sinking or maybe floating. A hallucination, maybe? I can't even tell what's real or not anymore, but thankfully, those visions of the battle are gone. I hope they're gone for good. I can't dare to think that the visions left me because the fighting has all stopped.

Bellanore appears. At first, I think she might just be a vision. Sometimes, they say that grim reapers will come in the guise of a loved one to ease your transition over to death, but she grabs my hand, and I can feel her. I can smell her, sense her beyond, with so much more than just my ordinary senses.

She's here.

She's really here.

"What cat did you have growing up?" she asks. "Why will a cat bring you hope?"

"The cat…"

The cat—our cat, Bellanore's and mine—stretches beside me on the guest bed. "The cat you told me about?"

"What cat?" Bellanore asks.

The cat lifts her tail high, her nose reaching up high toward the ceiling. "You mean he told me something and not you?"

"What cat?" Bellanore asks through gritted teeth.

"His brother had a cat."

"Yes," I murmur.

Bellanore sits beside me. I grimace, and she goes to stand, but I touch her hand to let her know I want her right where she is. She brushes my hair back and traces soft designs on the side of my face.

"Take your time," she urges. "You don't have to be in a rush to tell me."

“Rickard once saw a wounded cat,” I say. “He wanted to keep it as a pet.”

“A pet.” The cat snorts. “What you people don’t seem to understand is that cats aren’t pets. You are *our* pets.”

“Right. Sure.” I weakly chuckle. “Anyhow… I thought Rickard was ridiculous. We’re wolves. We’re canines. Cats and dogs don’t mix.”

“Yeah. I can see that. It is a bit ridiculous,” the cat meows.

“You’re a bit ridiculous,” Bellanore counters.

“True.” The cat grins and settles down near my hip, right where my hand is so I can pet her.

She’s ridiculous. Bellanore too. How is the cat—Rickard’s cat—going to help me any?

“But Rickard… he loved that cat,” I say, “and I loved Rickard, so I helped to save it.”

My throat grows tight as I recall the last time I saw the cat.

“Dural.” The name comes out with more venom and anger than I would’ve thought myself capable of projecting. “He even killed the cat. I found the dead cat on Robb’s dead body.”

The cat was loyal to Rickard even to the point of death,” Bellanore says softly.

The cat snorts. “You all act like loyalty is something only dogs can have. Cats can be loyal too. We might not be as obvious about it, but we take care of our own. We like our independence, yes, but we never forget our people.”

“Rickard loved that cat,” I murmur.

“Rickard loves you,” Bellanore says.

There’s something in her tone that tells me so much more than her words.

She saw Rickard.

They spoke somehow.

Rickard told her to remind me about the cat.

The cat Rickard loved…

“Rocky,” I murmur. “Rickard didn’t know if the cat was a boy or a girl, but he called the cat Rocky. If Rickard can find love in even a poor little cat, if he can see past what nature decrees is right and the way of the world, so can werewolves and vampires.”

The love Rickard felt for the act… The love I feel for Rickard… remembering our happy life together once upon a time…

I can draw strength from the memories of Rickard’s love.

The fever goes away. It just stops. I don't need the thermometer to know that's the case. I don't have to shiver anymore, and I stop sweating. All in all, I feel better, so much better.

But I know it won't last.

"Are you all right?" Bellanore asks slowly.

"He is," the cat announces. "Not cured, of course. We know what that'll take, but he's better."

I nod. "She's not wrong."

The cat swats at me.

I chuckle as I sit up and point to the discarded tray of food Mrs. Shade brought up earlier. I'm famished.

Bellanore brings it over to me, and I dig in. She waits until I'm almost finished to say softly, "We need to stop the war. Together."

"No. We need to stop your dad."

"Yes, that too."

"And we have to save Nia," I add.

Bellanore lifts her eyebrows, but she nods. "Anything else to add to the to-do list?"

I swallow my last bite and grin. "How about a kiss?"

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Chapter 20

Robb

The kiss is sweet and tender. I kind of want more passion, but Mrs. Shade coughs from the doorway right when I'm about to pull Bellanore closer and kiss her again.

"You've returned, Bellanore," Mrs. Shade says.

"Just in time from the look of it." Bellanore holds my hand.

"You ate!" Mrs. Shade rushes forward to take the tray. "How do you feel? You look better."

"I am better."

Mrs. Shade purses her lips. "Don't tell me you just needed a kiss from your true love," she grumbles.

I burst out laughing.

"Mom!" Bellanore's face is bright red. Her embarrassment is adorable.

"It's not the kiss," I say. I tilt my head to the side and tap a finger to my chin. "Or maybe it was. Let's kiss again…"

"Or not," Mrs. Shade says firmly. "Do you think you're up for it?"

"For what?" I ask, wary now.

"I've uncovered news about your father, Bellanore."

"When did you have time to do that?" I wonder. "Your mom had so many witches and fairies come to try to heal me while you were gone."

"How long was I gone for?" Bellanore wonders.

"None of that matters now," Mrs. Shade says with a wave of her hand, "and I've been trying to uncover information on your father since I came back into your life, Bellanore. Since before then."

"Can we talk in the living room?" I ask. "I want to stretch my legs. I've been in this bed for too long."

"Hurry then," Mrs. Shade says in a tone that tells me she's not pleased with being brushed aside.

Bellanore goes to lift my arm to put it around her neck to help me up. I catch Mrs. Shade's gaze. She's smirking.

Wait. Do I smell after all?

“I’m fine,” I assure Bellanore.

“I don’t mind—”

“I’m fine.”

Mrs. Shade laughs.

“What’s so funny, Mom?” Bellanore asks.

“Nothing,” I answer for her, which just makes Mrs. Shade laugh all the more.

I have to say that I like my future mother-in-law very much. She’s a hoot. Although I am a bit paranoid now…

The cat jumps off the bed and starts to lead the way out of the room. I stand, bend down to swoop her up, and bring the cat up to my face.

“Do I smell?” I whisper, hoping Bellanore, who is behind me, doesn’t overhear.

“Of course you smell. You’re a dog,” the cat meows loudly.

“You know, manners would be nice,” Bellanore says.

"Yeah, well, I doubt scruffy here can teach them to me," the cat says, wiggling out of my arms and dropping down to the carpet, landing on all fours, of course.

“Who you calling scruffy?” I ask.

“Would you rather I call you whiskers?”

I rub my chin. I do need to shave. Well, that can wait.

“What do you expect?” I ask the cat as we enter the living room. Mrs. Shade has her arms crossed as she waits for us. She stands in front of the TV mounted on the wall.

“Expect?”

“From a werewolf. I’ve had to shave every day since I turned six!”

“Seriously?” Bellanore asks.

“When did you start shaving your legs?”

“None of your business!”

“Can we talk about something more important?” Mrs. Shade asks impatiently.

“Mom, Robb was close to dying not that long ago.”

“He’s still dying,” her mom reminds her, “and I did what I could to help him in that time, but I’ve also kept tabs on your dad. Have you done that?”

Bellanore’s nostrils flare. “What did you find out?”

“Your dad has been accumulating not just wealth.” Mrs. Shade hesitates, and it’s not for dramatic effect. She’s that unnerved by this development, which makes me that much more nervous.

“What, Mom?” Bellanore cries.

Her mom shuts her eyes before turning her face upward toward the ceiling.

Toward the sky.

Toward the heavens.

“What else has he been accumulating?” I ask.

“An army of all kinds of beings,” she murmurs.

An army.

Why else do you want an army for but for war?

What kind of a war?

“There’s already a war going on,” Bellanore cries.

“Yes, but the werewolves and vampires are merely a distraction,” Mrs. Shade says.

“I figured that,” Bellanore mumbles, “but what’s his end goal?”

“I only just uncovered that there’s to be an attack on the Temple of Hosts.”

“The Temple of Hosts? What’s that?” I ask.

“It’s the one spot on Earth where angels freely teleport back and forth to Heaven,” Bellanore says.

“Do you know where that is?” my mom asks.

Bellanore shrugs. “No, but I’m sure I can track it down. I’ll just have to find myself an angel. If I can concentrate on his magical signature, I should be able to locate other angels. Where the most angels are… Boom.”

“Good.” Her mom beams, pride shining in her green eyes.

“When is the battle to take place?” I ask.

“In two days’ time.”

“What are we waiting for?” Bellanore asks. “We should head there now.”

“Go ahead,” I tell her.

Her eyes widen. “What about you?”

“Text me the location once you have it. I’ll join you when I’m ready.”

“What are you… Nia?”

I nod. “I don’t know why, but… I have to try to reach her.”

“Do you think you can?”

"She has a legit reason to hate vampires, but she's letting that hate control her. I could've done that. I could've given in to hate easily."

“Turn to the dark side, you mean.”

I want to grin at Bellanore, but this really isn’t a joking matter. “I was able to fight through it, but that was mostly because I was numb. For a while, I thought Nia was too, but she was just hiding her emotions. They’re too strong for her to overcome alone. She needs someone in her corner, and I suspect that’s not something she’s had since her dad died.”

“Is that why she hates vampires?” Mrs. Shade asks.

I nod. “One killed her dad.”

“That does explain a lot,” Bellanore murmurs.

“I don’t know if I like the idea of you going to the Temple of Hosts by yourself,” her mom says.

“I don’t plan on engaging the angels, Mom, so it won’t be that big of a deal,” she protests.

“You know how judgmental angels are. They’ll see you and recognize the demon in you, and that will be that. They’ll attack you and act like it’s your fault even if you don’t do anything to provoke them.”

“I’m not going to worry about any of that,” she says firmly. “They won’t even know I’m there.”

“How can you be so sure?”

Bellanore winks at me. She marches over to the wall and places her hand on it. In the span of a minute, Bellanore transforms herself into a picture hanging on the wall, which makes me wonder if a part of her is a nail too.

Her mom gasps.

Bellanore is able to shift back to herself in a much shorter amount of time. “See? They’ll never realize I’m there!”

“They will if they do a scan for magic,” her mom counters.

“Mom, I’m doing this.”

“Let me come with you,” she says.

I interrupt to give Bellanore a kiss, hug her mom, and leave the house. They need to work that out. I already have my own task to do.

Thankfully, Rhonda’s not working right now. She answers as soon as I call.

“I hate to do this, but I need a favor,” I say.

In the blink of an eye, Rhonda is beside me on the porch.

“You know, we could’ve talked on the phone,” I say dryly as I hang up.

"I know, but if a person needs a favor, they typically need your help right then and there and where they are, not from afar. Glad to see you're up on your feet again." She appraises me. "It won't last for long, though, will it? That taint isn't gone from you yet."

“Hopefully soon.”

“How can I help?” She rubs her hands together so hard and fast that her mohawk hair shakes and trembles but doesn’t fall down. It’s purple in the front that fades to a sapphire blue.

“I need your help locating a werewolf named Nia Forge. I need fairy dust to reach her.”

“Why?” she asks suspiciously. “Bellanore has tried to move Heaven and Earth for you—”

“I’m trying to stop Nia from making a terrible mistake and throwing her life away. She’s on a path that will end up with her earning Hell, and she might be sent there in the very near future.”

“So you’re still with Bellanore, then?”

“Yes.”

“You two say the ‘L’ word yet?”

I cough into my hand. “I don’t see how that’s any of your business.”

Rhonda tilts her head to the side and beams. “If you want my help…”

“That’s called blackmail,” I grumble.

“No, it’s called payment.”

“Fine. Not yet, but she knows I love her.”

“If you can tell me, then you can tell her. Tell her before it’s too late.”

“Yeah, yeah. Find Nia Forge.”

“Bossy, bossy. No one likes a crab.”

“If you need me to pinch you to get you to get a move on…” I snap my fingers together like I’m clacking a claw.

“Pinch where?” She wiggles her eyebrows, grinning recklessly.

Without warning, she sprinkles me with fairy dust, and I’m gone. When I blink my eyes open, Rhonda’s gone. So is the porch. I’m in a forest, up a tree. Down below, werewolves are fighting. There aren’t any vampires around. One of the werewolves is massive. Definitely a he. Just going on looks, he has to be an alpha. The other is smaller but so much quicker. Lightning fast, nipping and biting the alpha.

Nia.

And the alpha.

Not her alpha.

Before I can climb down more than a few branches, the tide of the battle turns. Before, Nia was getting a few bites here and there, not enough to maim. She always retreated quickly enough that the alpha couldn't strike back.

But now, he’s fighting back and fighting back hard. He slams her hard in the face, and she whines as she goes down. She scrambles backward, but he kicks her hard enough to make her fly through the air and slam her back into a tree. She tries to get up and falls down again.

As soon as my feet touch the ground, my wolf comes out, and I rush over to stand between Nia and the alpha.

To my surprise, I’m not the only one. I glance over, and Wyatt Spark nods to me.

Wyatt goes right, and I go left. I slash the alpha, and Wyatt bites him hard enough that when the alpha tries to shake Wyatt loose, Wyatt’s canines rip and tear the flesh of the alpha’s back. He rips Wyatt away, but the alpha’s wounded badly. He’s not ready to keel over at any second, but he is getting there.

Wyatt and I circle him. The alpha watches us warily, but then, there's a blur of fur before my eyes. Nia socks the alpha with her paw right across his face. Her other paw comes back, her claw dragging across his throat. Blood rains down.

The werewolf alpha tries to race after her and slips on the bloodstained grass. Nia kicks behind her, her hind foot striking him right in the face. The alpha struggles after her, but Nia tackles him, rolling him over. She climbs on top of him, pinning him down, her paws on his throat. She's not stopping the bleeding. If anything, she's making him bleed out that much faster.

Wyatt and I just stand there. The alpha doesn't put up much of a struggle. You can see the light of life leaving his eyes, and then he goes still.

He's dead.

Nia killed the alpha.

Her abuser.

The one who saw her as weak for having a father who had been killed by a vampire.

I know this might be too much to hope for, but I really do hope this means she'll side with us and stop hating vampires so much.

Then again, I'm not one hundred percent sure that Wyatt isn't against the vampires. He does hate demons, and vampires are demons…

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Chapter 21

Bellanore

The Temple of Hosts is beautiful. White walls, a golden steeple with a huge bell in the tower. Through the glass-stained windows, I can just see an iridescence platform with a white rim and a gold inlay. It basically seems like a portal, but there aren't any angels here. None are gathering here. There's no gate here to protect the temple, but I'm sure there are a lot of protective spells to conceal the place, to protect it.

My dad will not have an easy time destroying this, but maybe that's not his aim. Maybe anyone, living or dead, can use this to teleport to Heaven. It wouldn't be smart to have it teleport directly within Heaven, but even if they come through outside the Pearly Gates, I have a feeling that will be close enough for my father to make a move against Heaven.

Destroying this might not be his plan at all.

I'm not up close to the temple. I'm farther back, hiding among bushes. Yes, I came alone. Once I made my mom realize that I couldn't transform someone else into anything, and definitely not an inanimate object, she realized that her coming would potentially complicate matters. If anything turns dicey, I'm to teleport away immediately.

But nothing will happen.

Or so I hope.

I'm myself, not bothering to take on any other form. When I'm a rock or a picture frame and nail, I can't see like I normally can. I also can't hear as well either. My sight is hindered, tampered down some, and I hear as if from a long way away. It doesn't make for the best of devices for eavesdropping, but maybe with time and practice, I can get better at it. I'm also hoping to be able to transform into objects in lesser time, but for right now, I just stay hidden, watch, and wait.

Abruptly, to the right, a bush across from me on the far side of the temple rustles. A woodland animal? No, I don't smell any fur. Hmm…

I hold my breath and listen hard. Yes, there's breathing, and as I focus my vision, I can just see a red cap through the full bush.

A redcap. They're a specific kind of goblins that are particularly murderous. They don't have fingers, unlike other goblins. No, they have talons like that of an eagle or other bird of prey. They're quick and incredibly strong despite their penchant toward round bellies. Greenish skin, sharp teeth like small triangles ready to carve into skin.

I haven't dealt with any up close and personal before, and I don't want to change that today.

If I have to guess, though, that redcap is here for one specific purpose.

To spy.

Well, I might not be a saint, but I can have the patience of one, and I settle about to wait and watch him even more so than I do the temple.

No angels come and go. Do angels really need the device to reach Heaven? I'm fairly certain I could teleport to Hell if I really wanted to.

Thinking about Hell reminds me of Romelia, and a pang hits me. When all this is said and done, I'll try to find her, to save her if I can. There's no guarantee that I'll be able to, but I will try. For now, I just have to hope she can hang in there and not let Hell change her too much because I'm sure that going to Hell will affect any and every one.

Finally, the redcap jumps up and rushes off on his thin legs. He's shorter than most, maybe a little taller than the imp Draz, but he's also much faster than I am, and I'm not a slow runner.

Just when I think I might lose him, I hear the rumbles and grumbles of people. A lot of people. A ton of people.

I skitter to a stop. The redcap leads me to a forest, and now I scramble up one of the trees and use that to bring me closer to the group up ahead. It's possible that the ones I'm overhearing aren't related at all to my dad and his nefarious plan, but then I hear the distinct howl of hellhounds.

I shiver and hope these hellhounds aren't related to the one I accidentally killed.

Going from tree branch to tree branch isn't the easiest way to travel, and I do my best not to fall. So far, I haven't slipped once, and I don't want to. Before I put my full weight on a branch, I test to see if it's strong enough to support my weight.

It's a good thing I do because the next branch snaps right off and clatters to the ground.

The rumbling and howls and all of the talking stops.

I cling to the tree I'm on, sticking as close to the trunk as I can, hoping and praying that the leaves will conceal me because I am far too nervous right now to attempt to transform into anything.

After five agonizing minutes, the talking and rumbling of low

voices start up again. Man, are they a suspicious bunch. My muscles are aching from holding still for so long.

I only have to travel along three more trees before I reach the edge of the forest and stare out into a field covered in weeds and thorny bushes, where a host of creatures are gathering. As I watch from my high perch, hellhounds are chasing each other, their fires burning brightly among the darkening shadows of the approaching nightfall. Imps are playing dice. Some goblins are casting lots and throwing dice about the hellhounds.

A gargoyle flies over. The stone behemoth lands heavily, and the entire ground shakes, even my tree. I can't tell which creature the stone being is.

A shadow crosses above me. Another gargoyle. This one lands even more forcefully, and a smaller branch from above me detaches from the tree and clatters to the ground, but this time, the ones gathered expect it. A redcap, a different one from the one I trailed, grumbles at the gargoyle to be more gentle next time.

How does the gargoyle respond? He spreads out his massive stone wings, hovers a bit, and then slams back down to the ground.

So mature.

The scent of fire alerts me to another newcomer. Another winged beast, but this one breathes fire.

A dragon.

Make that a trio of dragons.

I swallow hard as the numbers keep swelling. Sprites come too, which surprises me since they aren't always evil, but the harpies aren't a shock. The half-bird, half humanoid creatures are bundles of hate if I've ever seen one. They will rip out your hair and peck out your eyes, and that's saying something since they have human faces to go with their bird bodies and wings.

Trolls rest against the trunks of trees, tossing each other a ball. It takes me a moment to realize it's a head but of what creature I'm not sure, and I don't want to use my enhanced sight to determine that.

Trolls are muscular warriors. I know not all are evil, but they always make me think of monsters with their grayish skin tone and red eyes. Although that one has blue eyes, so he must be a hybrid of some kind. Their tusks gleam in the starlight. The moon isn't visible tonight, for better or worse.

Let's see… What other creatures are here? I'll need to be as thorough as I can with my report. The three dragons, two gargoyles… Over a dozen imps, half as many sprites… The trolls are harder to tell.

What's that lumbering through the trees? A few even crash into some. Zombies. Well, they should be easy enough to kill a second time.

A woman shoves a troll out of her way. The troll barks at her, and the other trolls laugh, but she's not amused. Her hair moves wildly, and I realize that her hair is made of snakes a second before the troll turns to stone.

A gorgon, one of the vicious monsters that can turn any being into stone with a single glance. As if that's not bad enough, they have fangs to rival a vampire.

A roar rings out. A lion? A lion shifter? No, a manticore. At least one of them. How can it roar like the animal when it has the head of a human? The manticore has a lion's body, though. Some have venomous spines that form its tail, but others have a scorpion's tail. It loves to devour its prey whole, swallowing even the bones, which makes its triple rows of teeth superfluous and gaudy in the most perilous of ways. It's a lethal predator that enjoys human flesh.

Without warning, my skin crawls, and there's a faint tickling sensation at the base of my neck. A boogeyman lurks in the shadows where I can't see him. I know he's there, though. All kinds know about the boogeyman, but parents explain the monster away. Boogeymen are real, though, just as monstrous as kids fear, maybe even more so.

Why parents like to pretend boogeymen are only figments of a child's imagination, I don't know. Even my mom made that claim to me when I was terrified of them. Dad, on the other hand, reassured me and said that I would have nothing more to worry about, that he would handle it, and I was never visited by another one ever again.

Maybe parents try to downplay it because of their own lingering fears about the creatures. Boogeymen can read minds but only ever can learn what your worst fear is, and that's what they prey upon. That's how they feed. Boogeymen aren't normal beings because they are entities of fear, and that is all they can consume.

This. This is my dad's army. Maybe it's only part of it. There are so many, too many.

We don't have an army ourselves. We can't take all of them down. Not even if I reach out to Wyatt and the others.

My dad's army will be able to handle just about anything.

My dad's army…

A wicked, terrible idea comes to mind, and I smile.

Slowly, I descend down the tree, careful to make my presence unknown to the masses until I stroll right up to them.

A redcap notices me first. His jaw drops open, and he bows down low. I sneer at him, and my gaze wanders over the horde until I make eye contact with the boogeyman. He stiffens, straightens, and lowers his gaze as if he can't bear to look at me, as if I'm what *he* fears the most, and my smile has to be dark, twisted, vicious.

Because that's what I am.

The hellhounds, the imps, the sprites, the harpies, the boogeyman, and all the rest wait for me to start, and I do have to say that I appreciate being the center of attention. In fact, they all look absolutely petrified of me. Even the hellhounds are all sitting patiently, which is rather remarkable. They hardly ever sit at all. They're always on the go, as reckless and energetic as the fires covering their bodies. The flames can go out if they so choose, but right now, the fires are burning brightly if a bit dimmer than earlier before I—or should I say Ronath—arrived.

"What are you all doing here?" I demand. My tone is as sharp and harsh as my father's as deep and cold too.

They all glance at each other as if they can find someone to pinpoint the blame on, but none dare to say anything. The manticore opens his mouth, but my glower silences anything he might say or roar.

"You all must leave," I say just as sharply. "You can't risk congregating so close to the target!"

"But…"

It's a sprite who has the audacity to speak up. I'm not sure which one, and I debate for only a second before I force myself to conjure a fireball. It's not easy, juggling two very different and taxing forms of magic such as transforming for the sake of perfect mimicry as well as pyrokinesis, but I manage, and I grin, perhaps a bit smugger than my father would have given the circumstances, but it will do.

To add to my intimidation factor, I toss the fireball up and down, never allowing the flames to touch me. The heat is immense, though, and I struggle not to break out into a sweat.

"You all need to leave, and you need to leave immediately. Return in a fortnight."

Now, they're a bit emboldened, and they turn and talk to each other in hushed whispers. I can't make out all of what they're saying, but the shocked expressions and doubting raised eyebrows are more than enough to recognize that they are beginning to think something is amiss.

I toss the fireball at them and force it to land in front of the closest of the monsters. With a sweep of my arm, I force the fire to turn into a fire wall that stretches about three feet tall. The hellhounds can all see above it, and so should all of the goblins and sprites.

"There's been a change of plans!" I roar, doing my best to make my father's voice sound intimidating and forceful so I can say without saying that you will do what I say.

The gorgon keeps her head down and her snakes still. "Ronath," she says in a voice that is sweet as sugar. "We've been planning this for a long time. Do you mean to say that your daughter still isn't

ready?"

I bristle even as my heart begins to race. Does Dad think I'll take part in what he has planned?

"My daughter is not your concern," I spit out. "Yes, we've been planning this a long time, and that is why we cannot move until I say so. Until *I* say so!"

The boogeyman is the one to push back next. "The night has come," she says.

Wait. A female boogeyman? A boogeywoman? I hadn't thought about females before, but I suppose that makes sense.

My nostrils flare, and I hold out my hand and slowly curl it into a fist. "I will crush all those who oppose me," I vow. "Do not make the mistake of standing up against me now. If I say for you to leave and return in a fortnight, you…"

"Leave and return in a fortnight," the goblins shout.

Others join in the chorus, and slowly, they slink away into the shadows and leave.

I can't believe that this will work in the long-term. It might only last for a day. My father will learn about the creatures and monsters abandoning their post, and then, he'll realize immediately that I'm to blame.

So maybe I shouldn't have done this, but it's too late now. A reckless gamble, but now I know who my father has in his army.

And he has a full army.

Because I stand there for a half-hour, an hour, two hours, three, and still, more of the creatures are leaving. He has a countless horde on his side.

Even though the knowledge of the army is invaluable, how can we stand against that army's might?

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Chapter 22

Robb

As soon as Nia killed the alpha, she takes off, howling, into the wild of the night. I go to follow her, to talk to her, but Wyatt shifts back to his human form and holds out his arm to stop me. Reluctantly, I turn back to human too.

“You shouldn’t have stopped me,” I tell him.

“You need to let her go.”

There’s something almost harsh in his tone, maybe even a bit possessive, and I narrow my eyes at him.

“Why did you come here?” I demand.

“Why did you?” Wyatt crosses his arms. He has blood on him, cuts and bruises. He looks like he’s been through a war, and I suppose that’s not far off from the truth.

“Nia’s on a dark path. She’s choosing her emotions.”

“What of it? She can and should make her own choices. For far too long, she’s been under the thumb of a terrible alpha, someone who never should have been in a position of power ever. Why do you care what happens to her after everything she’s done to you?”

“Why do you care?”

Wyatt’s nostrils flare. “You really don’t know, do you?”

“Know what?”

“Roald and I… We were both in love with Nia.”

My jaw drops. “Are you serious?”

"She chose Roald for a bit."

“That’s why she was in the rough crowd, but… Didn’t she date Andre for a time?”

“A date or two to get him to help her. She never really cared for him, and besides, he’s dead.”

“Roald’s dead too,” I snap. “How convenient for you.”

“How decidedly inconvenient,” Wyatt snaps.

“But she killed Roald.”

“Yes,” Wyatt says with a grimace. “She’s a bit insane, but can you blame her? Her mother never cared for her, and her dad was killed by

a vampire. Her alpha turned against her, attacking her at times, and Nia never felt as if she could stand up for herself. She was tortured and tormented and—"

"She poisoned vampires. She attacked others. She killed Roald!"

"Already established," Wyatt barks.

"You still love her? After everything she's done?"

"Why did you come here?" Wyatt demands.

"I… I wanted to talk to her, to help her." I hesitate. "You did too."

"Yes."

"So why didn't you go after her?" I gesture in the direction she ran away.

"I'm done chasing after her. She's free now. Free to choose what she wants to do with her life. She can pick who she wants to be with. Do I hope that's me? Of course, but it's not my call." Wyatt hangs his head. "Elliot loves her too. Maybe Decker as well. She has a way of making you care about her, of making you listen. She's an alpha, was one long before tonight."

"She… She is the new alpha of the Forge pack," I say slowly as the realization dawns on me.

Wyatt smirks. "Yes."

"Can she handle that?"

"Are you asking if she's sane?"

I pause. That's exactly what I'm implying because honestly, I'm not sure Nia is entirely coherent and in her right mind. Who knows what she's capable of? How will she handle the Forge pack considering they allowed her to be abused? Who knows? It's possible the former alpha abused others as well.

"Supposedly, we're not given more than we can handle," Wyatt claims. "Nia can rise above everything. She can come back."

"Come back to you? Or come back to the light?"

"The light isn't always the best place to be. When you're hiding—"

"She won't have to hide anymore as alpha," I point out.

"Yes, but when you've lived in the shadows and now are thrust into the limelight… It'll be an adjustment for her, and I hope that just by being here for her then, when she fought and killed the alpha, that she'll know I still love her. That she'll come back to me."

"You love her, so you helped to free her."

"Even if freeing her means I'll never have her." Wyatt nods.

I shake my head. "I feel like I don't know you at all."

"I'm sure you have secrets too, and I don't care to know them." Wyatt shakes his head. We aren't best friends. We aren't even friends at all."

"What are you going to do now?" I ask suspiciously.

Wyatt snorts. "I'm going to eat greasy food and go to bed. Maybe

have a nightmare since I always have one if I eat right before bed, but that fight was killer. I need to eat and try to wind down some before I'll be able to sleep." He eyes me as if contemplating something and then shrugs. "Want to get a bite with me?"

"If you're buying."

"You're a cheapskate, huh? That how you got that scar?" Wyatt asks as he starts to head northward, away from Nia.

"We aren't friends, remember? Only friends get that story."

"Fair enough." Wyatt waits until we've almost reached the edge of a town to ask, "Want to be friends now?"

I burst out laughing. "Maybe if the greasy food hits the spot."

It does. Burgers and waffle fries, and when I say burger, I mean two patties and all the fixings. Half the stuff falls out of the burger, and I have to keep tucking it back in.

It's late, very late, and hardly anyone else is in the place. I think it might be closed to new customers yet, and the waitress gives us privacy.

Wyatt swipes one of my last fries. He's already polished his plate. "So…"

"The scar?"

He shrugs. "You don't have to tell me."

"What do you see in Nia?" I counter.

"She… She's strong despite everything that's happened to her. She's a fighter. No damsel in distress. Yeah, her methods are a bit extreme, but her life has always been kicked up a notch. Why wouldn't she react in kind, you know?"

"But her eyes… She looks dead inside at times. Like she has no emotions."

"She has emotions. She just tries to bury them. When you've been hurt so many times, you just try to stay numb." Wyatt eyes me. "I'm giving, and you're taking. Your turn to give some."

I exhale. "You ready for this? Because it's a whale of a tale."

He slurps the last dregs of his soda. "I'm all ears."

Before I can say anything, Bellanore materializes in the doorway of the restaurant. I rise out of my seat, and Wyatt glances over his shoulder.

"Seriously? You're gonna crash our party?" he complains. "Robb here was going to spill all of his secrets like a gutted fish spills his entrails."

"Do fish have entrails?" I ask.

"They have to digest their food somehow, right?" Wyatt asks with a shrug. "Don't mock me."

"I wasn't mocking you," I assure him.

"I'm sorry to interrupt," Bellanore says, her eyes wild, her hair

crazy. She looks a bit insane, channeling a certain dark witch from a certain series about wizards and witches. “I need to steal my boyfriend away.”

Wyatt glowers at her. “You have no idea what we’ve been through.”

“Try me,” she snaps.

Wyatt shrugs with one shoulder. “Maybe you’ve been through something too. Want to share with the class?”

“Class? Just what are you two teaching?”

“Swapping stories about our torrid pasts.” Wyatt winks at her.

“Oh, yeah?” she asks, clearly not impressed.

"Nia killed her alpha, who wasn't really her alpha since she was her own alpha, and now she's the alpha to her pack, I guess," I say in a rush. "As if that's not enough, Roald and Wyatt are in love with her. Well, Roald was, but she killed him, so it's safe to say that she didn't return his affections."

Bellanore blinks a few times. “You don’t say,” she murmurs.

“That’s just it,” Wyatt complains. “You two aren’t saying anything to share with the class.”

“You want something? Fine. Robb’s eyes glow because he’s cursed to be a lone wolf until he dies, but he’s managed to hang on this long. We’re trying to end the curse, but to do that, Robb has to kill my dad.”

Wyatt’s jaw drops.

“Still think you win?” I ask him with a smirk.

“You need to drink something stronger than Coke,” Wyatt grumbles. “Man…”

I place my hand on the table and slide out of the booth. “Thanks for the food and the talk. Friends?” I hold out my hand for a shake.

Wyatt shakes it, but he still looks a bit dazed. “You two…”

“We’re going to make it work,” Bellanore says firmly.

“Yeah, well, I don’t know about Nia and me, but…” Wyatt kind of gives us a wave. “You two, I’m rooting for ya.”

“Awesome. Thanks so much.” Bellanore’s words are a bit too over the top with sweetness, but her smile seems genuine enough. She grabs my hand, and I’m a bit shocked when she teleports us to my room at the academy instead of her mom’s place.

“What’s going on?” I ask her.

“Dad. His army. I got them to leave, but Robb, it’s a legit army. A full-bloodied army of monsters. Imps, goblins, gorgons, a boogeywoman… Did you know about boogeywomen?”

“Of course.”

“Huh.” She shakes her head as if to clear it. “Dragons, manticores, gargoyles, and more. I can’t tell you how many there are, but it’s… It’s more than we can handle. Even if we try to recruit others to help us,

we won't be enough. Dad… He's been planning this for who knows how long."

"Maybe since your mom left him."

She visibly swallows. "Robb, I'm scared," she murmurs. "I… I don't know if I can do this."

"Hey." I grab her hands right when it appears that she might be getting ready to start pacing. "First of all, there's no you doing this. It's us. All of us. You, me, and your mom. You aren't alone."

"When Draz first came to us, when he said that I should be willing to help you to kill my dad, when he died trying to give us information… Right then and there, I should've been all in. We should've gone after my dad immediately. Why didn't we?"

"Bellanore."

She squeezes my hands before releasing them and starts to pace anyhow. "I was so blind. I wanted to remember him as the dad who would help to teach me, the dad who was good and kind despite his nature. Was it all an act? Does he just want to rear me in his image? Is he going to try to convert me to be on his side? Does he honestly think I would want to have any part with him assaulting the realm of light? I hated when Wyatt and the others called me the princess of darkness, but that's who Dad actually wants me to be. He wants me to join him, and I can't. I won't, but not joining him isn't enough. We have to end this. We have to stop him once and for all." She stops pacing and stares at me. "We have to kill him."

I nod slowly. "Yes, we do, but, Bellanore, you look exhausted."

"I…"

"When's the last time you slept?"

She blinks a few times. "I… I'm not sure actually," she mumbles. "I've been running on adrenaline, and… You, how are you?"

"I'm hanging in there. You said you got the army to leave?"

"Yes, but—"

"Then we have time to sleep," I say firmly.

"Robb, we can't—"

"We can't go after your dad if we aren't in our best forms. We need to rest and recharge. Come."

I have to guide her into the bed and almost force her to lie down. She pulls me with her, and I hold her. It takes her a bit to settle and even longer for her to actually fall asleep, but soon, she's relaxed and breathing easy.

I'm not, though. Now is the time to strike her dad. Right now. Not in the morning. It can't wait.

Slowly, I ease out of the bed, careful not to wake her. I've been so used to Bellanore using her teleportation powers to get me everywhere. I climb into Lucile, my Honda Civic, and I drive to Mrs.

Shade's place.

A dark form sits on a chair on the porch. Mrs. Shade rises and smiles wanly at me.

"You need to tell me where your husband is," I tell her.

She inhales sharply.

"And you need to tell me what his weaknesses are."

"Robb."

"You always knew it would come down to this."

"You can't go up against him alone," she protests.

"I have to do what I must. My curse. My cross to bear."

"You can't go up against him alone and win," she argues.

"With your help, with your knowledge, maybe I can."

"You don't understand. Demons don't have weaknesses."

"They don't have any weaknesses? Or they don't have many weaknesses."

Mrs. Shade bites her lower lip.

"Demons have been killed. They've been banished to Hell and haven't been able to return to Earth. There has to be a way for me to kill him. Please, Mrs. Shade. You have to help me."

She hesitates and slowly shakes her head.

"I know you love him. Bellanore does too. But you both realize that he's too far gone. His army… Bellanore's seen it. We have to head off that army before it's unleashed on the world. The war they will engage in… It could end the world. Maybe it'll cause the war everyone's always been deathly afraid of, the war that will come about if the humans learn about us. By the moon, he might want to turn the humans all into zombies to help him! We can't allow that to happen!"

Mrs. Shade lowers her head. "All demons… They're all about fire."

"Fire. Hellfire." My mind races. "Water? Ice? Okay, I can work with that. Where is he right now?"

She doesn't want to say, and it takes me far too long to coax the answers out of her.

But he's at the ruins of a medieval church that had been burned to the ground centuries ago by himself.

The Church of Lost Souls.

That's what Ronath is. A lost soul that can't be saved.

I will end him.

Or he will end me.

Either way, this all will end tonight.

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Chapter 23

Bellanore

When I wake, I'm groggy. I don't think I slept very long at all. I squint and realize it's pitch black. It's completely dark outside.

I feel around for Robb, feeling unnaturally cold.

Because I'm missing the warmth of his body.

He's not here.

Shocked, I sit up and then jump out of bed. "Robb?"

I check the bathroom.

He's not there.

"Robb?" I call again.

But no one answers. The other students who lived here with him throughout year two have all moved back home for the break until the third year starts.

I call out for him again and again, desperate to find him, but my voice only echoes. Finally, I stop. Stop calling out, stop panicking, stop breathing.

And I listen.

There's no one else here. Even the cat is gone. That's not too surprising, though. The cat has been spending a lot of time at my mom's. I guess I just miss Robb and the cat, and I feel so utterly alone. If only the cat were here! But no, I can't even ask her where Robb is.

What terrifies me to the core is that I can't sense him anywhere. I've come to know Robb extremely well. His magical signature is very distinct in part because of his curse.

But I can't sense him. I can't teleport to where he is because I don't know where that location is.

The desire to panic comes over me again, but I temper that down as best as I can. Instead, I seek out my mom. Yes, it's late, and she might be sleeping, but maybe he couldn't sleep. Maybe he needed someone to talk to.

But why wouldn't he have woken me up? Yes, I need to sleep. My mind is all foggy from being so rudely awoken, and all of this panic isn't helping any.

I teleport to my mom's house. The light is on in the living room, and she's pacing back and forth in front of the TV.

"Mom?" I ask, my tone coming out harsher than it should.

"Bellanore," she says evenly as she halts before me.

There's a heavy scent on her. Guilt. Worry.

"Mom, where's Robb? Do you know where he is?"

She appraises me a bit. Her eyes are just like mine minus the glow, and she seems a bit… not herself. She's been so strong since she's come back into my life, and I need her to be strong now. I can't have her crumble on me when I'm fighting the urge to crumble myself.

Because I think I know where Robb is.

And if that's the case…

He might already be out of reach.

"Mom, where's Robb?" I demand again, my words coming out in a forceful whisper.

"He went to fight your father."

"And you let him!"

My mom purses her lips. "He is not my child. He is not my son. I can't control him—"

"He wouldn't have known where to go unless you told him!" I start to pace myself. "I can't believe you sent…" I draw up short. Dad. He's not at the house we stayed at. I'm not sure I can sense him either.

What does that mean? Are they both dead and in Hell? Is that why I can't sense them?

I can't breathe. My chest hurts, and I struggle to take in a breath.

"You…" It's not easy to get any words out. "You know where Dad is, don't you?"

"I do," she says evenly.

Robb. I can't believe it. He said we had to take on my dad.

What exactly had I said? What had he said?

"We have to stop him once and for all. We have to kill him," I said.

And he said, "Yes, we do."

We do.

We do.

Had he lied? I haven't thought to even check. I believed him, took him at his word, but he deceived me.

And now, he might die for it.

"You can't be furious with him," Mom has the audacity to claim.

"Oh, can't I?" I demand.

"Robb has a right to fight for his life."

"You sent him to his death!"

"Are you so certain that Robb can't do this?"

"He's hanging on by a thread, Mom! He almost died how many times? Right now, all that's keeping him together are memories of his

family. Memories of a cat that his brother loved. A cat! Mom, he is not ready for this."

“Love will find a way,” Mom says.

“Are you serious? After love got us into this mess? Love isn’t the answer!”

“Love is what is helping Robb. It’s what he needs. Love from you, love from his family…”

“Robb… He feels guilty over what happened to his pack. He blames himself for the curse because he let his alpha die. How can love be—”

“Even some humans know this. This power in love. There is magic in love. That magic is what’s helping him to fight the curse.”

“Alone, he’ll die,” I spit out. “You sent him—”

“I didn’t send him anywhere. He wanted to go, and did you ever stop to think that he wishes to spare you, Bellanore?”

“Spare me?”

“The guilt you will feel if you kill your father.”

I grit my teeth. “I will do what must be done.”

“You can say that until you’re blue in the face, but to see his face, to be the one to kill him… It won’t be easy for you to handle. I know that. Robb knows, and deep down, you know that. If you hesitate, what will happen? Do you think your father will hesitate to kill you?”

I swallow hard. “Mom, you have to tell me where Robb is. Where’s Dad? He’s not… I can’t sense him.”

“I’m not surprised,” Mom murmurs. “The location has a lot of dark magic there that will hinder and affect your probing.”

“Where?”

“The Church of the Lost Souls.”

“Where exactly is that?”

“It’s about an hour north of here, almost in Maryland.”

With shaking hands, she points to a map on the coffee table. I hadn’t noticed it until now.

I study the map, and then I bring up pictures of the church on my phone. There’s a forest nearby, one that’s rumored to be haunted by the lost souls of those who perished when the church burned to the ground.

Without a word, I ready myself to teleport, but then I stop myself.

This might be my last few moments alive. There's a chance—a good chance at that—that Dad will be the victor, that Robb and I both will die.

I can’t leave Mom like this.

She crosses over to me and embraces me. My heart aches as I kiss her cheek and taste salt. She's crying.

I’m crying.

I hug her tightly, and then I teleport away to the forest. The sound of mocking laughter fills my ears, and I rush through the forest toward the church and halt right at the tree line at the sight of Dad and Robb fighting.

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Chapter 24

Robb

Cold. Water. Ice.

The sight of the church where Ronath is has no water nearby, which doesn't surprise me at all, which means I'll need to bring the water or ice with me.

Ice would be best.

In this heat, though? It's August. It's hot here in Virginia.

So I'll need magic. Magic ice.

A magical icicle.

A magical icicle blade.

A magic ice blade.

Something like that.

I don't ask Mrs. Shade for any other help once she's given me the map. I snap a picture of it on my phone, and I'm good to go. Well, go arm myself. Then I can go and face Ronath.

But I can feel it, the ticking of the clock on both the poison and on the curse. I won't have much longer anyhow to try to take out Ronath.

It's do or die time.

"Thank you, Mrs. Shade," I tell her grimly. "You don't have to feel guilty at all. This isn't your fault. This is on me."

"Your curse…" She shakes her head. "Doesn't it seem strange?"

"I deserve to be cursed," I mumble. "I killed my alpha."

"I thought…"

"I could've brought him to a healer."

"But even if you had, he might have still died. You did not injure him."

"I didn't save him."

"You shouldn't shoulder blame that isn't yours to carry. It will only weigh you down."

"And that's precisely why you shouldn't blame yourself if I'm able to kill Ronath tonight."

"Not the curse then. The agreement you have with Zaun. To kill my husband. A life for the lives of your pack. Why would Zaun agree

to that?"

"He's the one who suggested it. I didn't know who Ronath was until he said so."

"Yes, but…" She bites her lower lip. "I do think that demons aren't always and entirely evil. They're complicated, complex creatures, just as we all are. We're all individuals with hopes, wants, dreams… How we go about living our lives can vary, given what we are. Werewolves and their packs. Witches can be in covens or practice solo. Not all demons are evil completely and thoroughly, and I still believe that."

I shrug. "Maybe Zaun's one of the good ones. He might not want the apocalypse now. Wants to stop what Ronath has planned. Or maybe Zaun wants all of that terrible glory for himself, so he wants his competition out of the way. I don't know."

"If Zaun is evil too if he does want to take over for Ronath… Your pack might stand against you and with him. Wolves are loyal to the bitter end."

"I know. I've thought of this. I'll do what needs to be done until I'm dead."

"I don't want you to die," she murmurs. "Bellanore won't be able to handle that."

"She's strong. She'll get over me."

"She shouldn't have to."

"She's going to need you," I tell her. "Once this is done and Ronath is gone… if I'm gone… If we manage to kill each other…"

"I won't ever leave her again."

I nod, and that's that. I leave and head back to Lucile. From there, I head to Cinnamon Crunch. The place isn't open, of course, but the drive gives me some time to think.

Almost all of my friends died when my pack had been killed. Rhonda's one of my only other friends. I trust her with my life.

Right now, I need her.

After I park, I take out my phone. I debate looking up Rhonda on supes.com in the hopes of being able to locate her address and then just decide to call her. My mind's a bit foggy at times yet. My first instinct should've been to call her right away. I'm wasting precious seconds.

My thumb is about to press the button to call her when there's a knock on my window. Startled, I drop my phone.

I reach to grab it as I roll down my window.

"Rhonda?"

"You know how they say your ears will burn if someone's talking about you behind your back?" she asks as she walks around the car and opens my car door to sit beside me.

"Ah, yeah, I've heard that, but it's bunk."

“Actually, it’s the truth. Well, with me anyway. I could tell you were looking me up. What do you need? More fairy dust?”

“No. Yes. Not yet, though. First, I need an ice weapon.”

“An ice weapon,” she repeats slowly.

“Something that won’t melt. Preferably won’t break at all. Something that will be strong enough to kill a demon.”

Rhonda gapes at me. “You seem to be better, walking, talking, driving, all that, but now you want to hunt demons. Are you crazy? You’re crazy. Does Bellanore know about this? Of course not. She’s not here. If she wanted in, she would be here, or…” She narrows her eyes. “She doesn’t know. Who do you want to kill?”

“Rhonda, the less you know, the better.”

“Nope, not good enough for me. Start blabbing.” She crosses her arms.

“Rhonda, I don’t have time for this,” I say through gritted teeth.

“Ask me if I care. No talky, no dicey.”

“Are you serious? Lives are hanging in the balance!”

Rhonda just shrugs and crosses her arms again.

“Do you want me to die?” I demand.

“If you go up against a demon—”

“I might die, yes, but if I succeed, I’ll end the curse. I’ll be saved. Not only that, my pack will come back. Rhonda, I need something to kill a demon. The only weakness I know for sure is water and ice.”

Rhonda hangs her head and slowly shakes it. “I don’t know,” she mumbles. “This is… This is crazy. You know that, right? And how will killing a demon bring back your pack?”

I lift my eyebrows.

“Necromancy? Really? So you’re in bed with one demon plotting to kill another demon. Oh, and you’re dating a half-demon.”

“It gets better. The demon I have to kill? The half-demon’s father.”

Rhonda lets out a low whistle. “No wonder Bellanore’s not here. Look, you can’t face him alone.”

I grip her wrist. “I have to. I won’t drag you into this more than I have to, and I won’t be able to live with myself if you die.”

“Robb—”

“Please. I’m begging you. I need an ice blade, and I need it now. I have to face him now, tonight, before the sun rises.”

“Why?”

“Because I’ve been poisoned.”

“On top of the curse?”

I nod.

“Wow. You know how to make some terrible choices.”

“Can you berate me later, after I’ve killed the demon?” I snap.

“You do realize there might not be a later?”

"So, you want to get all of your mocking in now?"

"No…" She gnaws on her upper lip. "You're crazy."

“I thought that was why we’re friends.”

“I don’t want to lose you as a friend,” she murmurs.

“Even if I die, we’ll be friends.”

Rhonda huffs a breath. “An ice blade? Fine. Wait here.”

And she fairy dusts herself away.

Does she have access to one? Will she be able to help me? Or did she just leave and abandon me because then she knows I’ll be unable to attack Ronath by myself?

If she thinks she can stall long enough that I won’t go after Ronath alone, she’s wrong.

Fairies can’t lie, but she never said for certain that she would help me, just that she doesn’t want to lose me as a friend. She never said she would get the ice blade either. Not in those exact terms.

I’m ready to go out of my mind. It’s been too long since I left Bellanore. What if she wakes up? What if she realizes what I’m doing? What if she goes after her dad before I’m even armed and ready to fight him myself?

Without warning, Rhonda’s back in the passenger seat.

“Here,” she says.

She hands me a bright blue, glowing sheath.

“This will help me with being discreet and stealthy,” I mutter.

“Keep your sarcasm to yourself,” she snaps. “You’re lucky I got this for you.”

“You just happened to have an ice blade lying around?”

“No, of course not. I know a guy.”

“What kind of a guy?”

“A dragon. He’s really nice.”

“Let me guess. He collects swords.”

"Yes, all kinds, and he's going to notice this one is gone, so you have to find this demon and kill him quick. Just look me up on supes.com again, and I'll come and take the sword back, okay? Tick tock. Time's a-wasting."

I nod a few times. “Okay.”

“Okay? That’s all you can say?” she asks incredulously.

“Yep.” I laugh. “I got this.”

“You have a plan beyond stabbing the demon with the pointy end?”

“No.”

She mumbles a curse.

I grin. “Don’t worry. I’ll take a page out of your book and wing it.”

"You're going to die, and Garish is going to kill me, and then he'll use his swords, and we're all going to die."

“A sword-wielding dragon? That would be a sight to see.”

"No, no, it wouldn't. Are you that insane?"

“How come you keep asking if I’m crazy or insane? I’m perfectly sane, thank you very much.”

“You’re also a liar,” she grumbles.

“Ouch. How rude.”

The ice coldness of the blade doesn’t seep through the sheath at all, and before I can ask if it’s all right to touch the hilt, Rhonda hands me gloves.

“I don’t know if you have to have them or not, but they were by the blade.” She shrugs. “Kinda strange if you ask me since Garnish is a dragon dragon, not a shifter. He doesn’t have hands, but…”

“Very convenient for me.”

Rhonda snorts. “Too convenient.” She eyes me. “Where are you off to?”

“The Church of the Lost Souls.”

“Ah. Want a lift?”

“Would love one, but you don’t have—”

She sprinkles me with fairy dust, and I’m there.

The ruins are majestic. Yes, ruins can be breathtaking. The church must have looked exquisite when it had been fully standing, and even now, it’s much more than just a heap of rocks. Portions of the stained glass windows are still intact, casting colorful shadows all over the scorched ground. Yes, somehow, the grass still is burned away. The stones are the kind that sparkles, mostly white in color, and I wish that I could’ve seen a picture of the place before the destruction.

From behind the rumble is a looming shadow with horns on its head. Ronath.

I tug on the gloves and remove the ice blade from its sheath. Ice is heavy, very heavy, and I’m not used to sword fighting. I think Magical Hunters Academy teaches their students how to use all sorts of weapons. If my life hadn’t gone down this road, I might’ve attended there, might know how to grip a sword, how to plant my feet.

I’m going in blind.

All that matters is that I’m going in, right?

I need to clear my throat, but I don’t dare and just slip to the right since the shadow of the demon is coming from the left. If I can just sneak in behind him…

But as I go right, the shadow shifts, and the demon heads that way, so I backtrack, careful to be slow and steady and not make a sound. As I narrow the distance, the demon again shifts and turns. Is he pacing?

Or is he toying with me?

As soon as I think that, the demon leaps onto one of the largest rocks of the ruins, lording above me, staring down at me with a

wicked smile. His eyes glow red, and I stagger back a step before planting my feet. I stab—

And he yanks the sword out of my hands.

His hand is on the ice blade.

He doesn't react at all even though there's a terrible hissing sound, and the stench of burnt flesh sears my nostrils. How can it be that he's being burned by it? That the burn doesn't agonize him.

To my horror, he tosses the ice blade aside, and then he grabs me by the throat, lifting me into the air. He has a dagger in his other hand, its blade tinged red, and he tickles the tip down the side of my face, the tip landing by the corner of my lips.

“You are Robb, aren’t you? The cursed werewolf my daughter’s been dating, the one she didn’t want me to meet. Did she really think I wasn’t aware of the nature of your curse? Of what you were promised? You will not end me. If anything…”

He draws back the dagger.

“I will end you!”

And he cuts me, slicing my lips. I somehow manage to break out of his grasp and fall to the ground, but the skin, the wound, I can already tell that my werewolf healing won’t work. A new scar for me.

And it might not be all I get from Ronath.

He might give me a visit with a grim reaper too.

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Chapter 25

Bellanore

Dad's standing above Robb, who is on the ground. Robb tries to scramble to his feet, but Dad backhands him. Robb goes flying through the air. He lands hard on his knees. His arms buckle, and he can't stop his face from slamming to the ground.

Dad leaps over in a single bound, and he grabs Robb, yanks him up, and stabs him in the stomach with some kind of glowing red blade. Robb lets out a strangled moan, and I can't. I won't. This will not happen.

Robb's not fighting Dad alone.

Robb's not going to fight Dad at all.

Before I can even consciously decide what I'm about to do, I'm already doing it. I teleport myself to Robb's side, grab him, and teleport away immediately.

With a strangled cry, Robb slinks to the ground in my mom's kitchen.

Mom rushes over. Robb's bleeding from his stomach and his face.

I should help him.

I should stay.

I can't.

I have to go.

With a prayer and a howl, I hope to see them both again, and I teleport back to the Church of the Lost Souls.

Dad's there, chuckling.

"Ah, Bellanore!"

"Let me guess," I say dryly. "I've disappointed you."

"No, no. Not at all, daughter of mine. I've known for a long time that it would come to this, that you and I would face off against each other."

I stare at him. His eyes are red with the fires of Hell, and while he had fought Robb in his demon form with his red skin and his horns big and visible instead of hidden in his dark locks, now, he's back to his normal appearance.

Or maybe the demonic appearance is his normal one, and the human one the alternative.

Whichever the case, it almost would be easier to face him as an adversary if he had the red skin. Perhaps he suspects that, and that's why he comes to me as he's always been around me.

To hurt me. To make this as difficult as possible for me.

"You always knew we would fight?" I ask.

Dad flashes a wide smile. "Yes."

"Then why did you train me?" I blurt out.

"Can't you tell me?" he asks, holding out his hands. He allows the bloodstained dagger to fall to the ground. I guess he wants us to fight demon-on-demon, but when did he use the dagger against Robb? There's a tingle of magic nearby, but I can't risk looking around for its source, although it's easy enough to tell that the magic isn't radiating from the ruins. The ruins, though, do have their own bit of magic, something both light and dark, as if the purpose of the building is locked in an eternal battle with the causes of its destruction and the vile nature of that act.

Maybe Robb brought with him a weapon, a blade or sword or dagger, something like that, and that's why Dad fought him in kind.

"Can't I tell you why you trained me," I murmur, and the answer comes to me. "You wanted to face a worthy opponent. You wanted me to be a challenge."

"Bingo!" Dad claps once, twice, three times measured and deliberate, each sound like a thunderclap in the piercing silence. There it is, the slow clap Dad does to show sarcasm. Normally, our wry sense of humor matches, and typically, it wouldn't faze me at all.

I won't say I'm fazed now, but I am unnerved. Robb… is he all right? That wound sure looked fatal. All of that blood… his face covered in it, his abdomen… If Dad hit any of his major organs, then Robb's already dead. His curse will be over and not because he broke it.

And Zaun, how will the demon react to Robb's failure? Will he come to take out Dad?

I can't worry about Robb. As much as it kills me, I can't worry about him right now, or else I will be the next one killed. As for Zaun, I can't worry about him right now, either.

It's just Dad and me.

As it's been for years since Mom abandoned me.

Dad grins. "I'm impressed that you were able to impersonate me and send away my army, but you do realize that's not even half of it?"

"I'm not surprised," I say wryly, doing my best to focus on that strange magic that might possibly be a weapon. If I can locate it, maybe I can use it against Dad.

"No?"

"No, you're full of hot air, and evil paranormal creatures do love hot air. Anything related to heat is their jam. You know, since Hell is such a hot place and all that."

Dad flashes a grin. "That's my girl. It's a shame that you would choose your mother over me after what she pulled. She didn't just leave me. She left you, too, and I'm sure she had her 'reasons.'" Dad actually does air quotes. Under any other circumstances, I would tease him mercilessly about that.

"You don't know the truth," I shoot back.

"Her truth? Or the actual truth? Either way doesn't matter. Your mother left us. I raised you to the best of my abilities. I gave you everything you asked for. I thought you would have been much better suited for Magical Hunters Academy."

I gape at him. "You never…"

"But you never once asked me which school to attend," he continues as if I hadn't interrupted. "You didn't care about my opinion. You knew best, after all." He smirks. "Or so you think you do. You can't stop me, Bellanore. My minions, they know the end goal. They will not hesitate to do what is necessary—"

"If you aren't around, none of them will be able to stand up and assume your place. They will fight amongst themselves, kill themselves, and it won't come to be. You won't assault the realm of light. They won't. You won't ascend to the rank of prince of darkness. I won't—"

"Ah, but that's just it." Dad winks at me. "There's one aspect you have forgotten, one demonic skill you haven't mastered, haven't even considered. One only a full-bloodied demon can do."

My skin turns ice cold. I know exactly what he's talking about.

Possession.

"Once you're dead," I start timidly.

"A full possession means that I leave my body behind." Dad's grin is positively vicious. "If it comes down to it, I will do what is necessary. If I can't be the prince of darkness in my body, then I'll take your body and do it."

Dad transforms into me. He looks exactly like me, and when I subconsciously rub the spot where I burned myself as a child, Dad smirks and lifts his sleeve to show off the mark.

The sight of him wearing my face, of trying to be me, incenses me. I can't quite pinpoint the exact location of the weapon yet, so I ignore it for now, instead opting to turn into my wolf. I throw back my head and howl.

It's a lament.

A cry.

Not for help.

But for me to do what is necessary.

I can't just kill Dad. If I do that, he'll take over my body. He'll survive.

No. I have to obliterate him.

Dad changes back to himself, although this time, he takes on his demonic form. He's far more muscular, and his red skin is like a hide. My teeth can't puncture his skin, and he flings me aside as if I weigh nothing at all. A whine slips out of me, and I pretend that he's injured me far more than just merely bruises.

Again, I launch myself at him. Dad catches me, and I turn into a golden poison dart frog. I should have enough toxins that I can kill ten grown men.

But do I affect Dad at all?

Of course not.

The batrachotoxin should cause issues with his heart, almost like the Mystic Twilight affected Robb. I thought it rather fighting. Dad could have an arrhythmia, cardiac failure, death. All from a simple touch of my sweaty, froggy self.

But no.

Of course not.

Dad just laughs. "You'll have to do better than that."

He goes to squeeze my frog, but I turn into a porcupine. No, not deadly, but I want to stick him, and it does force him to open his hand, so I fall toward the ground and turn into a bird. The thought crosses my mind that I could turn into a male platypus. The egg-laying mammal has poisons, but only the males do. It's a paralytic, and I doubt that'll help, so I just fly around, trying to locate that weapon.

I need something, anything to level the playing field.

Because Dad has the upper hand.

He'll kill me easily. He's just toying with me.

Everything he's taught me… Everything I taught myself…

I've known since I saw Dad walk through fire that he's incredible. He has a power and a strength that comes from the dark side, from the shadows.

From Hell.

A place of great darkness.

A place of immense heat.

What's the opposite of heat?

Cold. Water. Ice.

I'm not a witch. I can't conjure a storm, but I can survive them. Dad… He's been outside when it's rained, but it always affected his mood, made him cranky, irritable.

The rain affected him.

And we live in Virginia, but we almost always went for vacations or traveled through the southern states during the winter. Dad never said why we would go then, and I hadn't thought much of it. He homeschooled me until I went to the academy, so it didn't matter if I missed school. We would travel northward more in the summer, when there was no chance of snow.

I never realized that now.

An elephant. I can suck up water—

From where, though? There's no water source here.

Dad picked the perfect spot for me to not be able to use his weakness against him.

But maybe I can get him to fight me elsewhere. I would have to trick him.

Can I outwit a demon? Lie to a demon?

My life might depend on it.

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Chapter 26

Robb

I can hardly recognize what happened. One second, I'm fighting Ronath. The next, he's almost killed me. After that, Bellanore comes and whisks me away to her mom before she teleports away.

Back to the fight.

She's gone and left me to continue the fight.

Mrs. Shade is already pulling back my ripped clothes to eye my wounds. "Stop moving," she scolds.

It hurts like the devil—pun intended. She washes the wounds, and of course, they don't start to heal. Mrs. Shade opens a potion, but instead of having me drink it, she pours the contents directly onto the wound on my stomach. She's focusing all of her attention there. My face, my lips… they'll need to be washed again because I'm still bleeding there.

The potion smells like death itself, or maybe that's the wound. Maybe Ronath punctured my intestines or bowels. I should be dead within minutes, then, right? From toxins being released into my body? Why waste the potion on me?

"You should go," I mumble. "Leave me to die. Bellanore needs help. She can't face Ronath alone. Go to her."

Mrs. Shade ignores me. She grabs another potion from a wooden chest filled with all kinds of vials. It's actually rather beautiful—the chest and the potions—but I can't appreciate the beauty of it. I'm not sure when she got this or where she grabbed it from. Maybe she had it here, waiting and ready just in case. Why didn't she use these on me before when I had been on death's door?

The first potion had been a black color, but this second one is a deep blue. It smells like flowers and cloves, and she presses it to my lips.

More dribbles out of the sides of my mouth than I can swallow, and it makes the wound on my lips sting like I've been stung by a thousand wasps. My eyes water, and I choke and cough and sputter.

"You're going to scar," Mrs. Shade says with a grimace.

“That’s all right. What’s a few more?”

She just shakes her head. “Robb…”

“I’m not going to make it, am I?”

“The witches I had come to see you couldn’t help you. The curse is not just physical. It has a mental component.”

“That explains it,” I mumble.

“Explains…”

“My brother. Bellanore talked to him, and just remembering him, remembering his cat… Love, hope… It’s ridiculous, but that’s what got me out of bed.”

“There’s no such thing as a love potion. Nothing can force someone to love someone else. Love has to be freely given,” Mrs. Shade says.

“And you loved Ronath.”

“Despite everything, I still want to. I want to believe there is some good in him, that the prophecy is wrong. Every day that I was away from my family, I had to fight the pull to return to them. I wanted to be with them, to experience their highs and lows, to make them smile and laugh. That I caused them pain… I hated that. I hated leaving them, but I did it, and for what? In the hope of preventing this.” Mrs. Shade shakes her head. “You can’t bottle love, but you can brew hope.”

She reaches back into her chest and rummages around until she grabs a vial that has a round bottom and crystalline designs along the slender neck. The contents inside… It doesn’t appear to have anything in it.

“Drink this,” Mrs. Shade says.

“That’s hope?” I ask skeptically.

“It’s hope, but it’s only hope if you believe it is.”

She hands me the vial, and I stare at it, seeing its emptiness.

There is no hope.

All hope is lost.

I’m dying.

Bellanore is fighting her dad alone. She might be dying.

She might be dead already.

No! I can't accept that. I won't accept that! Bellanore deserves a long life even if that life won't have me by her side.

I have not only hope that Bellanore will survive this, but I will make it so. I will find a way to survive long enough to ensure that Bellanore will not die by her father’s hands. Claws. Whatever.

The vial in my hand grows warm, almost too hot to touch. The vial isn’t empty anymore. A glittery liquid is inside, as if it’s suspended light particles.

I drink the potion, and I can feel the bleeding stop. My wounds won’t kill me. They’ll most likely scar, but as long as I can stand…

I can stand.

Over by the door is an umbrella. I grab it and use it as if it's a sword. It's clumsy and awkward, or, rather, I'm clumsy and awkward, but I have a bit better footing now.

Mrs. Shade watches me, amused.

"I have to go back," I announce.

"We have to go," she says.

Again, she returns to her chest, and she removes a small pouch, which she hands to me.

"Use the fairy dust to bring us there," she says.

"Do you want any weapon?" I ask.

She shakes her head. "My fight will be with my words."

How that's going to help, I don't know, but I'm not going to waste any more time, and we fairy dust ourselves to the ruins.

Bellanore is shifting from her wolf back to herself. "I don't think I can do this," she murmurs. "Not here. Dad… Let's go home. Let's go —"

"Home? Do you mean the house you, your mother, and I—Sheila. It's good of you to return, and, Robb, you haven't died yet. No matter. I can change that in a heartbeat."

Bellanore turns to glower at us. She mentioned the home for a reason. She doesn't want to fight her dad here. I get it. Even I can sense the presence of strange magic emitting from the ruins. Maybe that's why her dad picked this spot, because of the dark magic here. Evil magic. Lost souls… Ghosts are lingering here even if I haven't seen one.

I'm willing to bet there's a grim reaper hereabouts too, lurking in the shadows, just waiting to swoop in and charter one or more of our souls to Heaven or Hell.

"We don't need to involve them," Bellanore says, desperation leaking into her words. "Ignore them. This is between you and me. We can go to our home—"

"You never once called that place our home," Dad snaps. "You think I'm a fool, Bellanore? That I can be led so easily astray? Would you like to look into a gorgon's eyes and be turned to stone? You could be a statue for the front yard of my house. How does that sound?"

The hissing of snakes sounds, and a figure emerges, just barely staying within the shadows of the nearby forest. "Say the word, and I'll do it, the gorgon I can't quite see says.

Ronath eyes Bellanore. She's silent.

Mrs. Shade clears her throat. "Ronath."

"I have nothing to say to you."

"You were given two ears," she snaps. "How about you use them

for once instead of flapping your gums as you do all the time? You think the entire world should listen to you at all times, but the weight of your words is going to sink the entire Earth."

"Sink it where?"

"To the depths of Hell."

"You once told me you were willing to do whatever it takes to be with me for all time. You knew then that it would mean that you would have to doom your soul to Hell. You loved me that much. What happened?"

"I—"

"Our love terrified you. You loved me when it was just the two of us, but once you became pregnant, you changed. You grew fearful. You managed to mostly conceal your fear up until a certain point. What happened?"

Mrs. Shade glances at Bellanore and then rubs her arm in the same spot I've seen Bellanore do on occasion.

Bellanore gasps. "You…"

"I saw Bellanore play with fire. She burned herself. She was trying to be like you," Mrs. Shade says through gritted teeth. "Our child hurt herself because of you, and I… I had to know if I…"

"If you made a mistake in loving me, so you went to a witch who convinced you to leave me, yet you left your daughter, the one who hurt herself because of me, in my care."

"You want to know why?" Mrs. Shade snaps. "I can tell you why. I loved you, and I still do, and I didn't want you to be alone. I wanted you to have love in your life, even if…"

"Love?" Ronath roars. "You twisted our daughter against me. You came back into her life and ripped her away just as I was finally getting her to be on my side. I wanted her to join me in this. I wanted to do this for her, for our legacy! We can be great—"

"There is more to life than—"

"No. Love is not enough. Love has never been enough. You've shown that, proved that."

Mrs. Shade steps back as if stunned. Bellanore, as they spoke, edged closer and closer to the ruins. At the same time, I circled around and now bend down to grab the ice blade.

"He has a blade made of ice," the gorgon calls out.

I scowl in her direction even though I keep my gaze on the ground so I don't risk making eye contact.

Ronath just laughs.

Without warning, a spray of blood shoots from the ruins. From Bellanore the elephant. The blood is coming from… ghosts? Yes, ghosts. I can see them.

Just before the blood can smack into Ronath, the ghosts fly over,

sweeping above and around and encircling the spray. The blood turns into bloody ice shards that pummel into Ronath's body.

He glances down as the blood melts, streaking his clothes, staining them, but I can't tell if any of the blood is his too or not.

But considering he doesn't stagger back a step, I'm guessing the icy blood didn't hurt him as much as we would've hoped.

Does that mean the ice blade won't help any either?

The sound of marching fills my ears, and Ronath smiles. Dragons soar overhead, and there's a lion's roar. Imps and goblins fill in the spaces between trees.

Ronath's army has come.

He holds up a hand, and they stay where they are.

We're doomed.

There's no hope.

But I'm not going to back down. This is it. Do or die.

I might die, but I will fight. Tonight, I'm a fighter, not a lover.

Or a fighter *and* a lover.

I nod to Bellanore. She teleports over to me, and then she teleports us to behind her dad. I stab him with the ice blade.

He grabs the blade. There's the stench of seared flesh, and I watch in horror as Ronath turns to face us and rips the blade out through his front, even the hilt. It's enough to make me want to collapse, and I lean against Bellanore, who leans against me.

The boogeywoman rushes forward, but Ronath flings his arm toward her. She flies back, knocking into the gorgon. The two look at each other, and the boogeywoman is immediately transformed into stone.

"Watch!" Ronath shouts. He holds out his hands and then rips apart his already ruined shirt to review the wounds marring his muscular red skin. As we watch, the wounds heal.

The ghosts shriek and wail. They head back to the ruins, and I doubt they'll try to help us again.

Bellanore starts to move forward, but her mom is the one to rush forward next.

"Ronath!" she cries.

He turns to his wife.

She embraces him with one arm, and then his body trembles. He staggers back.

"I'm sorry that my love wasn't enough," she murmurs, and she hugs him again, still with the one arm.

His body jerks as if he's been struck. "Maybe… Maybe it would've been." Blood leaks from the right corner of his mouth. "You… You can't… always… always trust… witches…"

His arms finally move, but instead of forcing her away, he returns

her embrace.

And then, rather abruptly, his body turns to ashes.

It's done.

Out of all of us, Mrs. Shade is the one to stop the monster she had a hand in creating.

If that isn't poetic justice, I don't know what is.

But Ronath's last words haunt me.

You can't always trust witches.

Had the prophecy been wrong?

Would love have been enough to prevent all of this?

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Chapter 27

Bellanore

I'm spellbound.

Shocked.

Amazed.

Broken.

Terrified.

Dad just died. He turned to ashes. He won't even be in Hell.

Mom crumbles to the ground. She reaches for Dad's ashes, and she brings her hands to her face. A silver blade, the hilt made of clear quartz and labradorite.

"What have I done?" she murmurs over and over again. "What have I done?"

Robb grabs my hand. "Bellanore."

His warning has me looking up. Dad's army is advancing, but the ghosts who gave me their blood and turned into ice, the ghosts Dad created when he destroyed the church, all race forward. They manage to kill a few of the goblins before the army starts to flee.

One by one, the ghosts blink out of existence, their souls able to move on to Heaven or Hell, their unfinished business finally completed now that their murderer has been vanquished.

I fall beside Mom, holding her. She's rocking back and forth, and even my holding her doesn't get her to stop.

I can tell when we're alone, when the army is all gone, when the ghosts have all crossed over. Only Mom, Robb, and I remain with Dad's ashes.

"It's a blade that will keep your father in Hell," Mom murmurs as Robb picks up the blade. "His soul… He can't teleport out of Hell now that he doesn't have a body. He's stuck in Hell for all eternity…"

My heart begins to pound. That sounds absolutely terrifying, but it's what Dad deserves, right? Because of what he planned?

But he only planned it because of having been loved by me.

It's my fault.

Someone has teleported behind me, and I should look. I should

care. It could very well be Zaun considering that Ronath is dead, but my only concern is my mom.

Robb's grip on the dagger tightens, and I glance over my shoulder, but the newcomer is walking around to face Mom and Dad and me. Well, what's left of dad.

"Why is an angel here?" I blurt out, recognizing the angel as the one who wouldn't let me through the Pearly Gates.

Robb shakes his head. "That's not an angel. That's Zaun."

"You're both right." The being snaps his fingers, and he reveals his wings. "I'm not Zaun. All along, I've been Zaphael."

"What… You said…"

"I have sought to bring balance to the world and right some terrible wrongs, including the curse placed on you, Robb."

"Wait. You can raise the dead?" I ask.

"Before that," Robb says, even though he looks paler by the second. No, not so much paler as grayer. Even his lips look gray. "I want to know everything, with Collin, with Dural."

"Collin made an agreement with the drow. Dural was to give the Aline pack an edge over demons to return to their ways as Darkfuries once again, only Dural always intended to kill you all. Zaun was too powerful, and Dural wished to appease him and offer the sacrifice in his name, not realizing Zaun had already been killed."

Zaphael states all of this without a hint of emotion. Did he have a hand in killing Zaun? I want to ask, but the angel is already continuing his story.

"I knew from the stars what the future would foretell, that Robb needed to kill Ronath… or at least have a hand in it. The stars aren't always easy to interpret." The angel smiles wanly.

"Neither are prophecies," I grumble.

Mom shifts slightly. I stood when I saw the angel, but Mom remained kneeling. She struggles to stand, and I help her up.

"Tell me, angel," Mom says in a voice that sounds utterly broken. "The witch, the prophecy… Did my love truly turn Ronath dark? Did…"

"Did mine?" I ask, knowing that is what my mom wishes to know but couldn't bring herself to say.

The angel hesitates, and it makes me wonder if they are cursed as fairies are so that they can never tell a lie. Angels can commit terrible acts. Angels can kill even, but that doesn't mean they can commit every sin.

"The witch lied," Zaphael finally murmurs.

"The witch lied?" I spit out. Fury laces through me. "What's her name? Why would she do that? She destroyed our lives!"

"She trusted the wrong person, and she paid the price for her

crimes."

"She will not take another breath. Who is she?" My hands are shaking. My nails are digging into my palms, and I can feel them cut the skin.

"She already cannot take a breath," the angel says. "You do not have to be consumed by rage and seek revenge."

"She's dead already." I feel hollow, as if something very important has been robbed from me.

"Why did she get caught up in the affairs of the Shades?" Robb asks. "This witch…"

"She was lured by a false promise. She had hoped for a different life and enjoyed wandering down a certain path."

"What if. It's a terrible, terrible path." Robb gapes at the angel. "The cat. That cat said that her witch went down that road, and it led to her demise."

"Wait. Our cat?" I blurt out. "She said that running away would've saved the witch."

The angel shrugs. "Maybe running away would've saved her, but the time to run away would've been when the demon first showed up at her door."

"Zaun? Or another?"

"Does it matter now?" the angel asks.

"If that demon still has designs against my family, then yes," I spit out.

"I understand your grief. The witch had regrets, and the demon said he could teleport her back in time so that she could have a second chance. A what-if moment, if you will."

"Who killed her? The demon?" I ask. I have to know.

The angel purses his lips. I get the impression he doesn't want to say, but after a measured breath, he admits, "The witch and the angel engaged in a duel to the death. Both ended up dying as a result."

"She faked the prophecy… The cat. Does she know any of this? That her witch set up my dad to be killed? But that was years ago. Why didn't the cat come to see us earlier? She made it sound like her witch died recently."

"The witch did die recently. The demon kept putting the witch off, never doing his part of the bargain. He would send the witch on errands to fetch this rare herb, that rare ingredient… He never could do what he promised. Of course not. Deep down, the witch knew, and as the days turned into weeks into months into years, the witch felt guilty. She realized the darkness that could befall your father was real, that only love could suppress it nearly to the point of extinguishing it entirely."

"Would that have been possible?" I ask. "For Dad to have not

been…"

"I do not like to speak of what can never be. Your father is dead. Let him be."

"But if… if things had been different…"

"The road of what if shouldn't be traveled," Robb warns me.

I stare at the angel as my mind races. There has to be something. My love, Mom's… that might not have been enough to extinguish it alone, but what if there had been another…

A daughter. Or a son.

My child.

I glance at Robb, who smiles back at me. Is he thinking what I'm thinking?

"If… If I had stayed?" my mom barely gets out, her gaze on the pile of ashes by her feet. There's no wind to speak of to carry the ashes away.

"If you had stayed, if you had loved Ronath as much as you professed to, he never would've turned to wrath."

"No army, no wanting to assault the realm of light, no wanting to become the second coming of the prince of darkness," I murmur.

The angel nods slowly. "I was engaged with Zaun for some time. I hadn't realized then the struggle you were dealing with, Sheila. I did not realize about the prophecy and the path Ronath was sent on until later, after I killed Zaun, and not even then. Not until I sensed the darkness Dural was trying to send Zaun's way."

"It's not your fault," I assure the angel, but I'm numb. It seems to me that Zaphael had been nemeses with Zaun for a long time, maybe even centuries or even longer. That battle took up so much of Zaphael's time that he couldn't pay attention to my family crumbling.

Not that it's the angel's duty to watch over us.

"Are you a guardian angel?" I blurt out.

Zaphael eyes me, but he does not confirm nor deny the claim.

"Ronath turned to power for validation instead once he felt unloved and unwanted," the angel says.

My mom shudders. A tear falls down her cheek. She bends down, pats the ashes, maybe picks some up, and then she walks away.

Her pace is slow, and I only have to walk to catch up to her.

"Mom," I say, holding onto her arm.

She stops walking, but she doesn't look at me.

"Let me help you," I cry.

She pulls her arm free, and she wanders off in a daze.

"I'm not sure you can help her," Zaphael says softly, suddenly beside me.

In silence, we watch her head toward the ruins. Mom's like a lost soul herself, and I hang my head.

“I should go to her,” I say.

A howl breaks out of Robb. It’s a cry of pure agony, and I race back to his side. He falls to the ground, and I almost fall on top of him, my hands on his chest.

“Do something!” I shout to the angel.

The angel eyes me but does nothing, says nothing, and I can feel hate welling within my heart. My dad is dead and gone. The witch lied and destroyed my family. Now, Robb's dying, literally seconds away from death, and the angel is just standing there instead of saving him?

“Would you give your life for his?” Zaphael asks.

“Yes.”

Robb shakes his head. At least I think he does, but it’s hard to tell because his entire body is convulsing.

“Take my life,” I choke out. “Whatever you need, spare him. Save him.”

“You love him that much?”

“I love him more.”

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Chapter 28

Robb

“No,” I try to say. I want to shake my head, but my body won’t listen to me. I’m not the master. The curse is.

For the first time in a long time, I’m numb. I don’t feel fear or worry or love. Nothing at all.

I’m not afraid to die or leave Bellanore behind.

I can’t even love her. I’m beyond all emotions.

My connections to the world have all ended, and now, I will go to Hell.

The angel holds out his hands. His head tilts back, and he stares up to the heavens. Words come out of his mouth, ancient words, powerful words, the kind I’ve never heard before. He’s chanting or maybe singing.

A wind kicks up. I can barely see what's going on. Everything is turning to darkness.

And then I feel hands on my face.

Familiar hands.

Not Bellanore’s.

My mom’s.

And just like that, the dam bursts. Whatever kept me numb is gone, and every emotion floods back in. I’m not ashamed to say I’m sobbing as I cling to my mom. Teenagers might like to act tough and pretend we don’t need our parents, but we do. The world is a terrifying place, and we need their guidance, their support, their love. We need them, and maybe they need us too.

I embrace her so tightly, and my face is buried in her neck. I can’t bring myself to pull away to look at her, and then there are more arms around me. Dad? Rickard? I don’t even know, but I can’t handle this. My heart is pounding too hard, too fast, and I fear I’m going to keel over anyhow, even though the curse has been broken.

My family is back. My pack is back.

I’m not a lone wolf any longer.

I'm not sure how long I sit there. Am I even sitting? I think so. I

think when Mom came to me, I sat up to hug her. I must've. Eventually, I'm dragged backward and forced to my feet.

It's Rickard. He's grinning at me, and what's more is that he's holding that orange striped cat of his.

I hug him, which squishes the cat, who rears and claws me. I stare down at the wound and start to cry again as the wound heals.

My werewolf healing ability is back.

The soft sound of someone clearing their throat makes me realize that I've completely lost myself. The entire pack is back, and I grab Rickard's wrist and my mom's and try to push through the crowd until I bring us over to Bellanore, who stands a bit off to the side, closer to the ruins.

Bellanore runs a hand over her hair and straightens her clothes. As if she needs to impress my family. It's ridiculous, but I love that she wants to make a good impression with them. Considering everything she's done for the Aline pack—or are we the Darkfuries once more? Either way, she's done so very much for us that we can hardly ever think about not accepting her as one of us even before we're wed.

Yes, wed. I'm certain we'll get married one day.

Bellanore's gaze shifts from me to my brother, and I swear she's grinning more broadly at him than she did me.

"It's nice to see you in the flesh, Rickard."

"Yeah, I guess so. You're beautiful."

"Hey," I say. "Don't hit on my girl."

"It's the truth, right? The angels hammered into me that I can't lie, so…" Rickard winks at her.

I knock him upside the head. Rickard shoves me back, and the cat that had been in his arms lands on his feet. The cat walks right up to Bellanore and rubs against her legs.

She bends down to pet him, and then goes to hold out her hands, seems to think better of it, and awkwardly puts her arm down.

"Hi, ah, Mrs. Aline, Mr. Aline," she says shyly.

I give Rickard a final shove and cross over to her side, but only after Rickard shoves my back. I can't wait to see if he's any better with his bat. Did the angels help him with his swing any? And Dad can have his hat, and Mom her dress…

I clear my throat. "Mom, Dad, this is—"

"Bellanore Shade," Dad says warmly.

"We feel like you're already part of the family," Mom says. She gives Bellanore a big hug. "Don't you worry about a thing. I will help you with everything."

"Everything?" Bellanore asks.

Mom winks. "I've been known to plan a few events."

"Events?" Bellanore asks.

“I planned our entire wedding, reception, funeral,” Mom explains.

I slap a hand to my forehead. “Mom!”

“What?” she asks innocently. “I’m only offering to help.”

“Don’t worry,” Rickard says. “I made sure to distract Mom and Dad whenever you two kissed.”

“You could see us?” I wince and rub my forehead. “Whenever you wanted to?”

“Pretty much!” Rickard says cheerfully. “Do you know he still picks his nose?”

Bellanore shrugs. “Everyone does.”

Rickard’s jaw drops. “She’s amazing,” he mumbles. “Why do you want to be with him?”

“Maybe because he’s amazing too,” Bellanore says.

I bristle with pride. “I should introduce you to… Ah… Wait here.”

Bellanore follows my gaze to where I noticed Collin. He hasn’t seen me yet.

“Do you want me to come with?” she murmurs in my ear.

“No. I’ll be fine. You okay with my family?”

“I—”

“She’ll be fine,” Mom says, hooking her arm through Bellanore’s.

I take a few steps before glancing back. Bellanore looks a little bit like a deer in headlights, and I feel bad. She’s been through so much, but this will only take a moment.

“Robb,” Collin says warmly.

I swallow hard as the alpha embraces me and thuds a palm against my back three times.

“Collin, I… I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry?” Collin lifts his bushy eyebrows. He’s a little older than my dad. Young and strong for an alpha, and as I stare at him now, alive and healthy, all I see is his bleeding body, his chest not moving.

“I… I never…” I can’t force out the words. Doesn’t he know what I did? Was he too far gone?

“Robb, if you’re worried that I’m upset that you stayed with me when I died…”

“I should’ve gotten you a healer!” I blurt out. “I let you die.”

“No, son.” Collin holds my shoulder and stares me in the eyes. “You do not need to feel guilty at all. I only lasted as long as I did because I drew strength from you. I didn’t want to leave you. What happened is not your fault at all. I should have talked to everyone. When I uncovered and found the ancient texts that revealed we had been the Darkfuries, I should have spoken to the pack. We should have decided together if we are to rise once more as the Darkfuries. You did nothing wrong. You did not kill me. Dural did.”

“And now?” I ask, feeling so very relieved. The weight of my guilt at seeing Collin alive again almost made me wish for the curse again.

“We spoke in Heaven, and if you are in agreement, we won’t be Alines any longer. We will be pack Darkfury once more.”

“I agree!” I beam. “Come. I want to introduce you to Bellanore.”

Collin follows me over. Bellanore is teasing my dad and brother and smiling at my mom. This all is so surreal.

It’s perfect.

“Bellanore, I want you to meet my alpha,” I say proudly. “Collin Darkfury.”

“It’s nice to meet… Robb Aline? Or Robb…”

“Robb Darkfury.” I beam at her.

“Hmm. I think I like the sound of that.” She giggles and then glances around. “Where’s my mom? Have you seen her? She should be meeting everyone too.”

I shake my head. “Not since she walked away.”

I grab her hand, and we excuse ourselves, but my family offers to help find her, and so does the rest of the pack. It doesn’t take us long to find her. The tree on the opposite side of the Church of Lost Souls has a body hanging from it.

She killed herself.

Bellanore races over to her mom. She unties the noose and tries to pound on her mom’s chest, desperate to get the heart beating again, but it’s clear there’s nothing that can be done.

“Zaphael!” Bellanore shrieks. “Zaphael! By the light of the moon, if you don’t show yourself—”

“I am right here,” the angel says wryly as he flies over. “Oh, dear.”

“Oh, dear? That’s all you can say? Bring her back! Please,” Bellanore adds belatedly. “Please bring her back. I need her. I can’t… Don’t make me an orphan. I… I need her. Please!”

“I would if I could,” the angel says.

Bellanore’s nostrils flare. Her eyes are bloodshot, and she’s trembling with rage. She has her mom on her lap, and her mom’s body jerks in response to Bellanore’s movements. I suspect that’s the only reason why Bellanore is able to stop trembling.

“The Alines were dead for how long? But you brought them back!”

“They… Their souls were in Heaven,” the angel explains softly. “I can’t bring your mother’s soul back.”

“She’s in Hell now,” Bellanore murmurs.

“At least she is with Ronath now. They have a chance to be reunited. Perhaps one day, they can learn to forgive each other and themselves.”

Bellanore just shakes her head and hugs her mom to her chest. “I can’t… This isn’t right! It’s not fair. My mom was tricked. A demon

tricked a witch who tricked Mom… It's… Why? Why do such terrible things happen to good people?"

"You knew deep down that your father had the capacity for love. It's why you didn't immediately agree to help Robb with his assigned task."

"You." Bellanore's eyes flash. "You poisoned Robb!"

"The poison would not have killed him."

"He could have died! Why didn't you just go after my dad yourself? You killed Zaun, didn't you?"

"I don't have much time left," Zaphael murmurs. He holds out his hand. It's turning translucent before our eyes. "Bringing back the Alines… or killing your father. I could have done one or the other, and there was a very good chance that Ronath would have been the one to kill me and not the other way around. Then, the Alines would not have been able to come back at all."

"But if you… I…" Bellanore shakes her head.

All of this is too much for her. She can't handle it, and I don't blame her.

"Why is there any death at all? Why can't angels just bring everyone back?" she demands.

"You know we can't do that."

"But why?" she asks angrily. "There shouldn't… Good people…"

A terrible thought comes to me. Bellanore. Her thread to her pack has been so very tenuous for so very long. She looks lost. Is that because of her parents, or is it also in part because of her pack?

"Ellamaria," I say to the angel. "Ellamaria Spark. She lives, right?"

"I'm not numb," Bellanore snaps. "I'm not close to being a lone wolf. I'm angry enough that I could…" The look she gives Zaphael is one of pure hatred, but then she lowers her head. Her dark and white hair hangs forward. "I thank you for trying to save the world from the evil demons have wrought," she mumbles. "Thank you for killing Zaun and for bringing back the Alines, for saving Robb. I wish… I wish none of this ever happened."

"If it hadn't, we might never have met," I say. I cross over to her and her mom and hold Bellanore's hand. "I wouldn't change that for the world."

She glares at me. "We would've."

"I would've gone to Magical Hunters Academy," I protest.

"And that's where Dad wanted me to go, but he never told me because I never asked. I would've gone there too. Maybe then I would've learned that clear quartz and labradorite can be used on a demon."

"It's mostly to help protect against demonic influence," Zaphael interjects. "The twin to that blade had been used against other demon

relatives of yours," he says to Bellanore.

She doesn't seem to care about that. Maybe she doesn't even hear him. She's in so much pain right now, and I want to help her, but I don't know if I can.

"I know you probably want me to hurry up and die already, but if I have time to say this…" Zaphael takes a deep breath. He's fading more and more. "You two have always been meant to be together. The love you two share… It's even stronger than the love your parents had, Bellanore, and their love… I suspect they will… If two can dare to find happiness in Hell, I suspect they…"

Bellanore's face is washed with fresh tears.

"Before…" The angel takes a strangled breath. "Romelia…"

"Dead, I know."

The angel shakes his head. "Back to life."

Bellanore gapes at me. "A life for a life," she murmurs.

The angel disappears, and I help Bellanore to her feet.

"We can bury your mom," I say. "Where?"

Bellanore glances around in a daze. I'm not sure she heard me until she ventures a grin. "At my home. Where we were happy. Not here. Mom's not lost. She's with Dad, and he better listen to her if he knows what's good for him."

"I'm sorry."

"Me too," Bellanore murmurs, "but I suppose things could have gone very differently."

I hold both of her hands and stare deeply into her glowing green eyes. I suppose mine aren't glowing anymore.

"Bellanore, I—"

She kisses me before I can finish what I've been wanting to say for a very long time.

A howl breaks out, and we pull apart and nervously laugh.

"Get a room," Rickard jokes. "No. Don't. Grab a shovel. I don't want to have to do all of the digging myself."

Bellanore laughs and shakes her head. "I'll do the digging."

"I'll help."

~

It doesn't take us long to bury Mrs. Shade. Bellanore says a few words, and I do too. Mrs. Shade had been tricked. Any one of us can be tricked by the forces of evil. It's what we do to atone for that that matters. A lot of evil came about because of a few people and their lies.

But evil doesn't have to continue to spread. It can be stopped, and love and hope can triumph.

I hate that a demon caused so much misery, the one who sought to destroy Ronath and twist him. Who was he? I know he's dead, and I'm grateful for that. Will Ronath ever learn who that demon was? Is that demon in Hell too? Will they meet up down there? What will happen?

I don't know if the story has ended entirely yet. I know that for Bellanore and me, our story is just beginning.

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Chapter 29

Bellanore

Burying my mom is just the start. We have a meal, the Darkfuries and I, afterward, and then we all sleep outside, under the stars. It's beautiful and peaceful, but dawn will be here in a matter of hours.

As happy as I am that Romelia is alive after all despite what my mom told me, I can't shake what I wanted to do for my cousin.

Visit her in Hell.

I'm not sure if it's possible, but as I did with Heaven before, I now do for Hell, and I leave the sleeping Darkfuries, including Robb beside me, all behind.

The heat of Hell welcomes me even before I open my eyes, and I swallow hard.

A low chuckle greets me, and I whirl around to see my dad.

"You won," he says. "You, your mother… Robb… I can tell his pack has been liberated."

I stare at him. He seems to have a new body exactly like his other one, but is he here physically?

"Can I…"

"Can you what, child?"

"Can I hug you?"

"After trying to kill me, you now want to hug me?" he grumbles.

"The Alines…" I hesitate. They're the Darkfuries now, but then, they had still been the Alines. "They could see us. Can you see me? Do you know all of what happened?"

"I've had some bits and pieces filled in, yes."

"Where's Mom?"

"She and I aren't on speaking terms."

I bristle. "You can't blame Mom! She was tricked! She told me over and over again how much she loved you!"

"She was willing to let a prophecy keep us apart."

"She let me stay with you because she didn't want you to live a life completely devoid of love!"

"She honestly thought that love would make me more demonic.

She couldn't see the truth."

"And you can't see the truth right now," Mom says dryly from behind him.

"Mom!" I race past Dad. I've been so focused on him that I'm not even sure what hellish landscape we're in, but I kick up red dust from the molten rock I'm on. I plow into Mom, only I can't quite touch her. There's a barrier of some kind, so I do the best I can.

Mom smiles maternally at me. "I'm sorry for leaving you, but I left your father once. I wasn't going to let him leave me."

"You killed me!" Dad roars.

"Yes, and you must realize now how much I love you, or else I wouldn't be with you."

"You abandoned our daughter all over again!"

"If you can't see that she's grown into a wonderful, loving, strong, fierce demonic werewolf, then I can't help you because you're blind!"

"You know," I murmur, "don't they say that love is blind?"

Dad glares at me. "You can't be here much longer, or else you won't be able to teleport out of here. Your soul will be tethered to this place."

"So I can't visit you all again?"

"Maybe. Maybe not, but it would be risky."

"Then you two need to hurry up and make up." I cross my arms.

"Bellanore, don't be ridiculous," my dad snaps.

"Look, I know that you wanted to assault the realm of light and all of that, that you formed that army and all, but that's not really you. This is you." I go to grab his hand but can't. Still, he acts like I can, and Mom does the same, and I "get" them to hold hands. "Will it take time for you two to talk and heal and forgive each other? Yes. I get that, but at least start talking. And start listening. Mom's right. You do have two ears, Dad."

"You do, too," he grunts, "so scram, you brat."

I grin even though it hurts to have to say goodbye. "I love you both. I wish…"

"Wishing is for morons," Dad grumbles. "You can wish all you want, but you have to go and grab what you want. You have to take it."

"Hmm… Go ahead, Dad. Grab who you want." I wink at him.

He huffs a sigh, and I can feel it. The heat of this place acts as hot tendrils that are trying to anchor my soul. Just before I teleport out of there, I can see Dad reach for my mom.

And not for her neck either. For a hug.

Maybe they can find happiness in the most unluckiest of places. I like to think so.

Just because there's peace as far as my dad and Robb's curse doesn't mean there's peace on Earth. There's still the matter of the worldwide war of werewolves on vampires, and when Romelia's mom reaches out to Collin that she's gathering alphas for a meeting to try to stop the war, for there to be peace, I opt to go along with the rest of the Darkfuries. I'm sure the Ember and Spark packs will be there as well, but I will be standing with Robb.

By his side is where I belong, or is it that he belongs by my side? Either way works.

When we arrive, I'm shocked and appalled to see that so many of the other wolves around us in all shapes and sizes are wounded. The stench of anger, hurt, and hatred clings to them, as does the smell of blood.

I hate war.

A massive dragon flies overhead, and that's when I see my cousin with my own eyes. She truly lives! Does that mean that she had never died?

Another werewolf helps Romelia from the dragon. Julian Mooblaze.

"My cousin," I murmur to Robb.

Robb shifts a little to see her better. Then his gaze shifts to Julian, and he chuckles to himself.

"What's so funny? Are they together? A vampire and a werewolf?" I gape at them. Yes, Julian and Romelia are holding hands.

"Like Rickard and his cat." Robb shakes his head. "They met during our first year."

My jaw drops. "How did you know that?"

"I saw them talking at the Red Moon Ball. I didn't know why he was disguised as a vampire, but he didn't seem to do anything that would suggest nefarious intentions, so I let them be, and then Nia and the others started that fight, and I was distracted dealing with that."

"Speaking of Nia…" I can see standing with the rest of the Forge pack. She meets my gaze, and Nia solemnly nods. To my shock, she and the Forge pack look whole and healthy.

As if they haven't been fighting vampires.

Is the world coming to an end?

Collin, Nia, and a few of the other alphas turn into wolves and head to the center. Julian and Romelia, hand in hand, approach them.

"I am Julian Moonblaze," he says. He doesn't need to shout because all around us is silence.

He shifts his feet, and the fresh scent of blood wafts to me. The ground here is slick with blood.

“I am the alpha to a small pack, a pack of two,” he continues, “but I will venture to say that my pack is the most important pack of all.”

Werewolves growl and grumble at that. One of the tallest and most muscular wolves steps forward and shifts to his human self.

“How dare you bring a vampire here to this meeting!” He beats his chest, and the other wolves, the alphas and the members of their packs, all howl and growl in agreement.

Julian holds up a hand, but they don’t listen and hardly settle even after their alphas give them a warning growl.

I glance around, trying to find Ember or Spark, but there are too many wolves for me to locate them.

Gradually, the wolves settle, and Julian says calmly, “My pack is here with me.”

My heart pounds. Romelia and Julian wed? And I wasn’t invited?

The nerve!

Although I’m not sure I would’ve been able to attend, given everything with my dad.

“You mean to say…” The alpha’s gaze falls on Romelia.

Julian laughs and lifts his hand joined to Romelia’s. “This doesn’t give it away?”

Then he holds up his hand to reveal his wedding band. Romelia does likewise. Then they show off where they pricked and marked each other.

“You bit each other?” the alpha asks with scorn. I’m not sure which pack he’s the leader of.

Romelia bristles beside Julian and glances up at him. At Julian’s nod, she steps forward. “Yes, we bit each other, and we drank each other’s blood, both before the wedding and then mixed during the ceremony. We have been to Hell and back, and we know that our love is not conventional. That vampires and werewolves are supposed to hate each other, but why? Why do the deaths have to continue?”

“Hey!” one of the wolves shouts. He’s not an alpha, but one of the alphas nods, and the wolf steps forward. He has a thick beard and full mustache, and the curly black mop of hair on his head shakes as he points toward the dragon. “That vampire there, that’s Caterina Coven!”

I had been so fixated on Romelia and Julian that I hadn’t realized there had been a third rider on the dragon. A vampire with stately beauty. Of course, I should’ve realized Mrs. Coven would be here, considering she orchestrated this meeting in the first place.

Romelia swallows hard and glances up at Julian. “She is… She is my mother.”

“Do you know how many werewolves she has killed over her unnaturally long life?” the werewolf demands.

“Did you forget what I said my last name is?” Romelia asks sharply, and I grin. My cousin is feisty, and she’s not about to back down. “I know who she is.”

“And you forgive her?” the first alpha says with more than a little bit of scorn. “You dare to bring her here—”

“I dare to hope for peace,” Julian says evenly. “I’ve found love with a vampire, yes, and I can see a better future for us all. What do you think is going to happen if this war of yours continues? It will not go unnoticed for long. The humans aren’t stupid. You’re being reckless and thoughtless, and how many more werewolves are dying fighting the vampires? For what? A demon has been pulling your strings. He wanted the war—”

“Wanted?” Nia asks. There’s only curiosity in her voice, none of the bitter resentment she had for so long.

Beside me, Robb is beaming like a proud papa. He helped Nia so very much. Ugh, there’ll be no living with him now, not with how fat his head will be.

Another alpha limps forward, one of his legs lame. It takes me a moment to recognize him, but I'm fairly certain he's the father of Mercy Lance. Mercy, Bermon von Hagen, and Julian are the best of friends.

Mercy’s father transforms into his human self and nods to me. “The demon is dead?”

“Yes,” Julian says firmly. He’s looking around. For his former alpha? His father? After a moment, he blurts out, “For what? You’re fighting for what? The demon Magmar wanted to use the war as a means to have all of the werewolves killed, slaughtered.”

I gasp.

“You know that demon?” Robb asks.

“My cousin, Romelia. Magmar’s her father.”

“And he wanted all of the vampires to die alongside them,” Romelia states.

The wolves begin to grumble at that.

“Magmar wanted Hell on Earth,” Julian continues.

“Believe me,” Romelia says, “Hell on Earth is not the place you want to raise a family, and that is what you want, isn’t it? To raise your families? Don’t you want there to be peace for their sake? Why continue to seek out blood?”

Another werewolf starts forward. Jackery Moonblaze, Julian’s former alpha. Jackery shifts to his human self, but he continues walking, entering the no man’s land between the werewolves and Romelia and Julian. He halts two feet from them.

“You went and married without my consent?” he asks, his words a rumble from deep within his chest.

“I found love with a vampire, and no one and nothing will keep me from her. Not her father or her mother or… or anyone.” Julian lifts his chin and doesn’t back down. There’s not a trace of weakness or fear or doubt.

Jackery nods slowly, and then he sweeps Julian into a big hug. Still holding Romelia’s hand, Julian pat his back.

Then, the two lovers—vampire and werewolf—stare at each other. After a moment, Romelia grins and nods, and Julian smiles back at her. Their love reminds me of the love I feel for Robb, the love my parents share if they would allow themselves to. They both made terrible mistakes and caused years of anguish and pain, but together, they can move forward. They can be in love once more.

Julian murmurs something I can’t make out.

Jackery slips to stand behind Romelia and Julian, and he lifts their joint hands. “Moonblaze recognizes Mooncoven!” he declares.

The wind shifts, and newcomers come along. All around us, werewolves shift into wolves, and they descend, racing at breakneck speed. Only a few of the werewolves don’t go to join the others, namely the Darkfuries. Even the Forge pack shift into their wolves, but they remain in their spot, not joining the march.

The wolves rush past the gathered alphas.

The newcomers aren’t another werewolf pack.

No, the newcomers are vampires, far too many to count.

“Moonblaze, halt!” their alpha cries, marching forward.

Julian and Romelia march alongside him, and now, instead of werewolves versus vampires, there’s a new divide, werewolves and us versus vampires.

I want to start forward, but Robb grabs my hand. He slowly shakes his head. “If anyone can bring peace to werewolves and vampires, it has to be them. It needs to be them. They’ve found love. Their love might be enough.”

“It has to be,” I murmur as I watch Romelia and Julian advance until they’re in the no man’s land between the werewolves and vampires.

If they can't broker peace, the battle here will be massive. The number of lives lost will be catastrophic.

No pressure, though.

I’m grateful we’re at an angle that I can see Romelia’s profile. At least her back isn’t to us. She lifts her chin, and I can see her strength. She’s a living vampire, the offspring of a vampire mother and a demon father, and she’s accepted both sides of herself. That much is plain to see.

“Vampires,” she calls. “I am Romelia.” She glances at Julian and then repeats, “I am Romelia, daughter of Caterina Coven and Magmar

Shade. Magmar is dead, killed between the combined efforts of my husband and mother."

A hushed silence falls over the werewolves finally. The vampires have, all along, been hushed as the moment with evenfall comes to blanket the land with darkness each night as dusk arrives.

"Magmar sought to use you, all of you," she states firmly. "He wanted you to be his soldiers, his marching orders for you to kill the werewolves and the living vampires? You were to kill any turned vampires who survived, weren't you?"

Robb stiffens, and I gasp. I had been locked in my own familial drama, but this is something else.

A murmur rises up among the vampires, and some start to shift away from each other as distrust mounts. Vampires are a rather excitable lot at times, especially when they feel threatened, and to have that threat come from their own kind… they will not take kindly to that.

"My father then planned to turn against the living vampires," Romelia adds. "He wanted Hell on Earth, and that would have been a place of dominance for demons and demons alone."

"Magmar and Ronath weren't too different, were they?" Robb asks me as a few vampires started to call out and hound Romelia.

"No," I murmur, "they weren't."

"Can you trust the demon's daughter?" a vampire shouts.

Romelia flashes her fangs. "You can, and you will. I helped to kill my own father because that is not a future that is acceptable to me, but neither is this! The war he wanted, the war he needed to assume dominance over the entire world… Do we need carnage to survive?"

"Well, we do need blood," one vampire says sarcastically.

"Yes, we do need blood, but we can have it without having to kill," a familiar voice says.

I stare at the new vampire. I think I saw her once before. A friend of Romelia's? Yes. Tyra. Tyra… I can't recall her surname as she pushes her way forward and halts two feet from Romelia. She turns around to face the vampires.

"I don't know if you all have been using your eyes or not," Tyra continues, "but she's standing here with her husband. That's right—a werewolf. Now, I was against it from the start. A vampire and a werewolf? My cousin, my best friend, she had to have been crazy, and I tried to save her from herself. In the process, I almost lost myself. My father died. My father was a demon, and I never learned to accept his death or his legacy, and I became polluted by the darkness inside of me. I couldn't control my rage, my anger, anything. I lashed out, and I ended up hurting people, killing them." Tyra glances back at me. "I can't change my past, but I will change my future, and I will not be a

party to any more killing. Romelia and Julian are fighting for peace, and that is the only fight I will partake in."

"That goes for us too," Mercy declares. She and Bermon push forward to join us. Mercy glares at one of the alphas, who limps over, as does Julian's old alpha.

Slowly, a few of the students attending Blood Haven join the throng as do more werewolves. Now, Nia, Collin, Robb, and I, and our packs all move forward to join them.

But the alpha who first spoke out shakes his head. "They married, shared their joined blood… But they only pricked their fangs. We don't recognize that."

"It's not good enough in your eyes?" Julian asks.

"Not nearly," the alpha says, his words a low growl.

Julian and Romelia exchange a glance, and they nod.

Romelia's hand raises. By the light of the moon, all those gathered should be able to see that her fingers are now claws.

Julian holds perfectly still as she slices three claw marks near his shoulder. He, likewise, does the same. Then, Julian gives her his claws, and she licks off his blood. Before she can lick the blood from hers, he returns the favor.

Murmurs sound all around us, but still, there's fury yet from the werewolves.

"What more do you ask of us?" Julian calls out, spreading out his arms, his claws now fingers again.

"What more do you require?" Romelia asks the vampires in turn.

It's the werewolves who answer first.

"You want peace? We can't have peace. Not while she lives."

They're referring to Romelia's mother, who is still perched on the dragon's back.

With the grace of a queen, Mrs. Coven slides down and steps toward us. All those near her fall back away. They fear her, but there might be some awe too. She's killed almost entire packs of werewolves.

"You want me to pay for the crimes I committed against your kind," Mrs. Coven says slowly. "If that is the only way for there to be peace—"

"Mother, no!" Romelia starts forward, but Julian holds her back.

Mrs. Coven smiles at Romelia. "You wanted me to undo what your father did, and I will, but I also have to undo as best as I can what I did. The only way to accomplish both is this."

"To die by our claws." The alpha grins maliciously.

"No!" Romelia shouts again. She yanks free from Julian's grasp and races over to her mother. "No," she repeats more calmly. "You require her death, fine, but I will do it."

“You’ll give her a merciful death,” he spits out. “After she’s slaughtered us—”

“Our aim is to bring peace,” she says evenly. "Why should it start with tearing someone guilty limb from limb?" Romelia lifts her chin. “After all, not even HEX Unite came for my mother. They didn’t even come for my father. I had to be the one to move against him, and I did. For this. For peace. I will do the same with my mother.”

Mrs. Coven smiles down at her daughter with a look of complete peace and happiness. "I'm sorry I wasn't a better mother, that I played the part of your father's pawn so completely and thoroughly. I… I feared moving against him would result in my death."

“I wish I didn’t have to do this, Mother.”

“I’m glad you will be the strongest of us all. Romelia the Peacemaker.”

“Romelia the Lover more like.” My cousin blinks back tears, and I do too. Romelia and I have so very much in common. We need to spend time together. There’s no reason why we can’t be the best of friends.

“Go on! Kill her!” a werewolf shouts.

Romelia glowers at the werewolf.

He steps back, whining.

“I love you, Mother.” She embraces her.

Julian steps forward. “I’m glad I had the chance to call you mother, Mother.”

Mrs. Coven chuckles. “Take care of each other, you two. Your love has stopped a war. You two can do just about anything.”

Mrs. Coven steps back then and nods to Romelia. My cousin uses pyrokinesis, and her mother is nothing but ashes in a second.

For a moment, Romelia hesitates, and then, a breath of wind comes, and she spreads the ashes all across this field, a morbid, symbolic confetti for the treaty that has been forged this day.

“Now, do we have peace?” Romelia calls out.

And there’s howls and cheers of agreement on both sides. Julian pulls Romelia close for a tight hug, and she cries.

I start to cry too. As much as I want to go over and hug her, the moment belongs to the two of them.

But despite the tears, I have so much peace and happiness in my heart. All around me are Robb’s family. My family.

I miss my parents, and I always will.

Peace can be so very bittersweet.

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Chapter 30

Robb

Two weeks later, Bellanore and I are at the wedding reception for Julian and Romelia. We're in a field with a backdrop of mountains. Some werewolves are running about, and it's so very freeing to be here, to know I have a future, that life will be what we make of it. There's no curse, nothing like that.

Bellanore squeezes my hand, and then she slips away to talk to her cousin.

The cat scratches my pant leg.

"Watch it," I scold.

The cat sticks out her tongue. "You said you would get me some food."

"Soon."

She tilts her head to the side. "I like the new scar."

I touch it. The scar over my left eye and then the scar on the right side of my lips. Marks of what I've survived. I'm not just a fighter. I'm a survivor. A warrior.

"Your witch… Did you know about the role she played in Bellanore's life?" I ask the cat. It's something I've been wanting to ask these past two weeks but never did.

The cat lowers her head. "I knew. I… That's why I came to you two. I didn't know if I could help any…"

"You came to me first. Why not Bellanore?"

"You two hug and kiss so much that you smell like each other." The cat bristles, causing her whiskers to shake. She pats the whiskers. "Can I eat now?"

"You have helped us."

"I'm sorry. For my witch."

"It's not your fault."

"No, but… Look. Listen to me, okay? I know what I'm talking about. I told my witch to stop, to ignore that demon… She didn't listen. You listen to me, and it'll be like you have nine lives. I'm telling ya."

I glance over at Bellanore. She's still talking to the bride. "All I need is one life with her."

The cat sighs. "And food. How about getting us some food?"

I laugh.

Bellanore crosses over. "What's so funny?"

"Are you hungry?" I ask her.

"Thirsty."

"Stay here."

"No, I'll get it. Wait. There's Ellamaria. I invited her."

She goes off, and I watch her. Then my gaze connects with Julian. I'm happy for him, but I'll wait to approach him with Bellanore. Julian and I haven't talked in a long while. I don't know if he even remembers who I am.

I head to get something to drink and then grab something for the cat, too, to keep her happy.

Gradually, I head over closer to Bellanore. She's still talking to Ellamaria. They're arguing about something.

"I can't help what your father told you," Ellamaria says, "but my research said that the terms are actually spinster, thornback, venus deathtrap, lady of the blade, and fanged dowager."

"I still say doomwitch and hengequeen are better," Bellanore counters.

"I don't know," I interject. "Lady of the blade suits you, don't you think?"

Bellanore grins at me. "Only if I start to take fencing lessons."

"Then take some."

"Hmm. I'll leave you two be." Ellamaria winks at Bellanore, nods to me, and walks off.

I hand Bellanore my drink so she can finish it. "You don't have to worry about being a spinster or any of those terms."

"No?"

"No." I look around at all of the people celebrating Romelia and Julian's love. "Isn't this very fitting? Maybe we'll have a wedding reception one day."

Bellanore giggles. "Maybe we should graduate first," she teases. Classes will start up soon. Because of the war between werewolves and vampires, both academies haven't started up for the next school year yet.

I eye her. In a lovely white dress with rainbow sparkles and a glittering silver belt, she looks like a dark angel. She's mesmerizing.

What did she say? Oh, yes.

I burst out laughing. "You can already graduate because of the extra courses you took."

"What about you?"

“You can tutor me in all of the courses… and maybe in love too.”

“You do realize how corny that sounds, right?”

“Maybe, but I love you. Isn’t that enough?”

She wraps her arms around me and kisses me soundly on the lips. “Yes,” she murmurs, her glowing eyes shining. “Yes, it’s enough.”

~

Keep reading for a bonus short epilogue!

The Moonstone Academy trilogy is part of my A Mayhem of Magic World Story universe which starts with my Bedlam in Bethlehem series. It’s so much fun to keep expanding this world!

Next up will be a trilogy centered around HEX Unite!

Please consider leaving a review if you enjoyed Moonstone Academy Year Three! I love to read my reviews. Thank you!

Until next book,

~Nicole

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By the Light of the Moon

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Chapter 1

Robb

Night steals over the land, the moon shining high above me. I'm running wild as my wolf, my thoughts running wild too.

I love Bellanore Shade. She might have a demon father, but she is as angelic a werewolf as could be. Not only is she gorgeous with black hair, some strands white, and glowing green eyes, but she is cunning, intelligent, fierce, powerful… She's everything I could ask for and more.

And I do want to ask for more. I want to ask Bellanore to marry me. We've been through so much together already. We faced my curse, and I survived in part because of her. Unfortunately, her demonic father plotted to overtake the world. In a way, he had been cursed too. In an effort to try to prevent her husband from turning to evil, Bellanore's mother misunderstood a prophecy and instead actually caused his descent into mad evilness. As a result, her mother committed suicide. The two are now in Hell, together. Bellanore, the romantic that she is, hopes they can reconcile. It's strange to think that love could blossom in such a place, but if my crazy life has taught me anything, it's taught me that anything can happen.

I race up the mountainside, trying to think. What would be the perfect proposal? A picnic? A race up this mountain? A race up the mountain to a picnic? No, that all seems too mundane. She deserves something far more special.

Let's see… I could always take her to our favorite spot. Cinnamon Chance. Rhonda Rainbow, a fairy and a good friend of both of ours, would love to help me out, I'm sure, but I don't know. That seems a bit like something a human would do. Not that I think humans are less than no-longer cursed werewolves like myself, but I want something truly special.

Bellanore had made a comment to me once that maybe we should wait until after we graduate from Moonstone Academy to get married, so I know she'll say yes to any proposal, but still, I don't want just any proposal. She's not just any demonic werewolf.

She's part demon. Maybe a trip to a volcano or some other hot spot? But that might make her think of her parents. I got to know her mother, and Bellanore and her mom had gotten to be super close before everything went down between us and her dad.

Maybe I should bring Bellanore to the cave where I almost died. Nah, that's not exactly a happy memory. Then again, having a happy memory there would sure help to erase the bad ones.

I'd love to propose to her in front of her mom, but that's not possible, and although I'm beyond happy that my family is back to life again, I'm not sure I want them to get their wet noses in on this.

Maybe we could go somewhere exotic. Europe. Asia. Africa. Which spot would she enjoy? Probably all of them, but none of them would have any true specific meaning for us. Granted, any location where I would propose would automatically have a special meaning in our hearts, but it would be almost manufactured meaning.

Hmm. There's the cat. A cat weaseled itself into our lives. Still hasn't told us her name yet. Maybe she can play a role in the proposal.

Nah. If I do that, she'll take all the credit and never let me live it down. Plus, when I'll want to kiss Bellanore after she says yes, the cat's liable to not shut her trap and yap and try to steal the attention away. All cats love attention, and this cat is no different.

Maybe a hike? In our human forms or our wolf forms. Or maybe at a bookstore. A restaurant. On the beach. Maybe I could write a love letter. Yes, I like that idea.

I turn back to my human form and sit on a rock. Hmm. What could the letter say? I could talk about how much I love Bellanore, how much she means to me… Yeah, that already seems too sappy. Nope. Can't do that. I don't want to risk either of us getting a cavity.

What about a picture of Bellanore with a rock on her left hand? Or I could get her flowers, and we could pop some champagne. How about in a forest? Wolves are so very close to nature, almost as close as dryads and fairies.

They say a way to a guy's heart is through his stomach, but what about a girl's stomach? I could get cupcakes or a cake that spells out *will you marry me?*

A boat ride could be fun, but honestly, I don't like the water all that much. I can doggy paddle, but that's about it.

Maybe a scavenger hunt! Nah. That would require far too much planning, and I'm rather impatient. Have you ever met a patient dog? I don't think so.

We don't have a lot of photos of us, that it's not like I could make a slideshow or a photo album. What about some kind of a trivia game? But that would require as much work as a scavenger hunt, and I'm just not up for that.

I run a hand through my hair and stare up at the moon. Her silvery face smiles down on me, but she doesn't offer me any ideas.

Not one of these ideas is good enough. Not one. It's enough to drive me up the wall.

Maybe I could ask my parents for an idea or my alpha, but I also don't want to risk anyone slipping to Bellanore.

I close my eyes and picture the ring I bought for Bellanore. It's not a diamond. Bellanore is too special to have such a traditional ring. Instead, I got her a huge oval opal that shimmers like the moonlight. She'll love it.

Maybe a simple proposal is the way to go. I might not be willing to write a letter detailing all the ways I love her, but I should be able to tell her in person how I feel about her.

"As if she doesn't already know," I mutter to myself.

"You sure went a far way away," a familiar voice complains.

From the darkness, the cat jumps onto a nearby rock. She jumps again, landing on my lap.

"Maybe I wanted to get away from you," I tease.

"Why would you want to do that?" The cat shakes her head and starts to lick her paw.

"Why do you do that? You're just going to get a hairball."

"Look, I don't ask why you do some of the boneheaded things that you do. Leave me some peace, will ya?"

"I suppose, but you don't exactly leave me some peace now, do you?"

"Touché," the cat admits. "What are you doing out here all by your lonesome?"

"Trying to think."

"I thought I smelled something burning."

"Haha."

"No, seriously, I know thinking's hard for you. That's why you're trying and failing."

"Do you come all this way just to insult me?"

The cat shrugs. "You got me."

I roll my eyes.

"You're uptight," the cat observes.

"I just have a lot on my mind." I hesitate. "How's Bellanore?"

"She fell asleep at her desk again. She studies too much."

"I don't understand why," I mumble. "She's already at the top in all of her classes. She could graduate already if she wanted to."

"She wants to continue to go to school because you're such a slacker."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You heard me."

“I was dying for most of my education at Moonstone!”

“Excuses, excuses.”

“Easy for you to say, Small Fry.”

“Don’t talk about food,” the cat complains.

“Hungry?”

“Yes.” Her ears perk up. “Do you have any food?”

“Eat some grass.”

“Do I look like I have four stomachs?”

“You have put on some weight recently.” I poke her belly.

“You are so rude. I don’t understand what Bellanore sees in you.”

I shake my head. “I am so very lucky to have her in my life.”

“You really are. You don’t deserve her.”

“You really think that little of me, huh?”

“Who knows? Maybe I would tell her that she doesn’t deserve you either.”

“Would you?”

“You know I play both sides.” The cat stretches. “You two are my two favorite humans. That’s not saying much, though.”

I snort. “Of course not.”

“You heading back soon?”

“Why?”

“Bellanore’s sleeping at the desk. I can’t sleep on her lap. If you go to bed, I can sleep on your stomach or your chest.”

“Ah. You want to use me. I see how it is.”

“You’re so warm,” she says, “and I’m tired.”

“Tired enough to fall asleep without resting on me.”

“But I like to.”

“I know. You like to have everything be about you, don’t you?”

“That’s the way all females like it, not just me,” the cat protests.

Hmm. The proposal should be all about Bellanore in some way. I’ll figure it out. I have to. I want Bellanore to be my wife, and I hope she’ll follow in her cousin’s footsteps and agree for us to be married before our third year at Moonstone is done.

After everything we face, when you have love, you want to cling to it and never let it go.

I’ll never let Bellanore go. Not ever.

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Chapter 2

Bellanore

My classes are easy, far too easy if I'm honest, but I study hard anyhow. I want to know if there is a way for me to return to Hell to see my parents again without the risk of my soul being permanently trapped there. All of the research I've done suggests that what I want isn't possible, but that doesn't mean I don't have hope. After all, Robb's entire pack had been slaughtered and returned to life again.

Robb Aline. Now, he's Robb Darkfury. His pack had been demon hunters at one time. Granted, demons do tend to be evil and cause a bit of mayhem and destruction, but not all demons should be killed or sent to Magical Prison. I, for one, and glad that the Darkfuries seem to be willing to see and observe the demons they come across before determining if they should move against them or leave them be.

As a student in his final year at Moonstone, Robb isn't trying to round up any demons, which makes me happy. He's thriving at the academy. During his first two years, he had been dying bit by bit every day, the victim of a curse of being a lone wolf, but now, his pack has returned, and Robb is blossoming.

He used to be a loner, but now, he has his family back, his parents and his brother, Rickard. What more could he want?

With my parents being dead, I don't have a lot of family left, although my pack has accepted me back into the fold. They had rejected me as my mother had, but that had been a huge misunderstanding on my mom's part.

I also have a cousin, Romelia Mooncoven. She's a living vampire, which means she has a demon for a father. That's how we're connected, on the demonic side.

She's married to a werewolf of all people. Julian Mooncoven. Right now, their pack is only the two of them, and I am so very happy for them. Their wedding had been a beautiful testimony to the power and might of love. A vampire and a werewolf. Who would've ever thought that possible?

As if she can sense that I'm thinking about her, my cell rings.

Romelia is calling.

"Hello, cousin," I say easily.

"Bellanore, hi. I have a question for you, and I hope you won't take this the wrong way, but… I know your father is obviously in Hell, but do you think your mom is too?"

"Oh, I know she is," I say. "I went to Hell to visit them, but I can't risk returning. I could feel the pull of that place on my soul. I won't be able to leave if I go back."

There's a pause.

"Why do you ask?" I ask, curious.

"I… I'm sorry."

I laugh. "Don't be. I'm fairly certain that my parents have managed to reconcile despite all odds, so they found happiness in Hell. So unlikely, I know, but it's what I want to believe."

"I hope that's the case," Romelia says.

"Is something wrong? You sound a bit… different."

"I just wish I could help you," she says sadly.

"Help me?"

"I'm sure you want to talk to your parents again."

"I would love to, but you don't have to worry about me."

"I… Maybe I shouldn't tell you this because I don't think it'll work for you, but maybe it will if you're wanting to try…"

"What are you talking about?"

"I'll be able to bring back my mother's soul for one night during the lunar eclipse next week," she says in a rush. "My mom went to Heaven, though. At least, I think I did, but I made two potions, one for me and one for you to sprinkle on the ground in the presence of the lunar eclipse. Maybe… Maybe it'll be powerful enough to work on your mom's soul even if she's in hell. Honestly, it's possible that's why my mom is too, but I have to believe that I'll see her again. I need her advice."

"Advice on what?" I ask, not daring to get my hope up.

"Being pregnant," she whispers.

"You're pregnant! By the moon, that's amazing, Romelia!"

She giggles. "Thank you."

"How do you feel?"

"I'm okay for now."

"That's so wonderful. I'm so happy for you."

"I couldn't be happier, especially if this potion will work. You'll try yours?"

"I might as well."

~

And I do try the potion.

And it fails.

But I don't mind. In my heart, I'm certain that my parents are happy once more. Love is one of the strongest emotions, second only to hope, and my love and my hope are both as intense as ever.

So intense that I call Robb. He answers on the first ring.

"Come and find me," I say to him. "Let's go for a walk."

The moon is shining so very brightly tonight, and my heart is full. I want to share this moment with Robb. He knows about the potion, and he also knows I thought it would fail. I'm okay about that. I seriously am.

It doesn't take Robb long at all to find me. I'm sure he used his nose to follow my scent. Without saying a word, we start to walk hand in hand.

For so long, Robb and I had to fight for absolutely everything. Now, he has his family, and I've lost mine, but I also gained his, and we've made friends along the way.

"Are you happy?" Robb finally asks.

"Of course I am." I beam up at him, grateful he didn't ask if the potion worked. I don't want to worry about that. The past is in the past, and the future has never looked brighter.

And I'm smiling up at my future.

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Chapter 3

Robb

By the light of the moon, Bellanore is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. Just being so close to her makes me feel more alive than ever before. I had been so numb, fading away bit by bit when I had been cursed as a lone wolf. Wolves are meant to be in a pack. We are not solitary creatures, and I will never be alone again. My family has been brought back from the dead, but soon, I will have a new family.

Tonight. Tonight is when I will ask Bellanore to marry me.

But not yet. Soon. When the moment is perfect.

"If you could change the world, anything about it, what would you change?" Bellanore asks, breaking the comfortable silence between us.

"At this very moment, I wouldn't change a thing," I say honestly.

"Not even all of the heartache and pain we experienced."

"It was all worth it because it led me to be here with you. Do I wish your parents were still alive? Of course. Well, so long as your dad would behave himself, but I really do want us to be together for the rest of our lives, and I know that is going to happen, so no, I wouldn't change anything."

I hesitate. Now might be the perfect moment to ask her, but I also want to know what she would change.

Before I can either turn the question back around on her or propose, Bellanore is talking again, once again breaking the silence between us.

"Robb Darkfury, will you marry me?" she asks with a twinkle in her glowing green eyes.

I drop my jaw and scowl.

"Is that a no?" she asks with a laugh.

My nostrils flare. "I was just about to ask you to marry me?"

"Ah. In that case, I can safely assume your answer is yes?"

"I can't believe it," I mumble. "I wanted everything to be perfect. I tried to plan every detail, and I was going to ask you to marry me tomorrow. I had it all set for it to happen during classes with the aid

of our professors, but then you called me here, and I thought, okay, I'll just do it now, by the light of the moon, but no. You had to steal my thunder."

"Well, the moon's lighting on you gives you a halo that almost looks like lightning." She winks at me. "You aren't all that mad at me, are you, for asking you? Does that matter? You want to marry me, or else you wouldn't be in a tizzy about not being the one to ask me. Clearly, I want to marry you, or else I wouldn't have proposed, so…"

"Does this mean I get the engagement ring?" I joke.

"You'll getting a wedding ring, and even better, at least I hope you agree it's even better, you get my heart."

"I already have your heart."

She rolls her eyes. "Yes, Robb Darkfury, you already have my heart. Boy, you aren't the most romantic werewolf, are you?"

"I'm sorry," I say sincerely. "I just… You threw me for a loop."

"We have had our fair share of surprises," she murmurs.

"Both good ones and bad. This is a good one," I hasten to add.

"I'm glad you agree, but, ah, you technically still haven't answered my question."

"What was the question again?" I tease.

"Robb Darkfury, will you marry me?"

"Why, yes, Bellanore Shade, I will marry you." I wink at her. "But you're going to have to wait until I propose to you tomorrow to get your ring."

"Silly boy," she murmurs as she throws her arms around my neck. "I don't need a ring. I just need you."

"You're going to give me a cavity. You're being far too sweet."

"What can I say? You bring out an angelic side of me that I shouldn't have." She tilts her head back, laughing.

Man, do I love to hear her laugh.

I touch her chin, bringing her head down so I can kiss her, so I can kiss my fiancée.

~

The next day, I do what's necessary and go through all of the motions. Bellanore and I aren't in every class, but her first professor for the day asks her to head over to my class to deliver a note to my professor.

When she enters the room, she stares directly at me, even as she hands over the note. My professor reads it out loud.

"'The all-seeing moon ne'er saw her match since the world begun.'" The professor nods to me. "Can anyone here tell me who this line refers to?"

I jump to my feet. "'She hath not forsworn to love, and in that vow

do I live alive that live to tell it now.'"

"I see," the professor says, clearly amused and playing his part perfectly. "A love like that is rare indeed, but knowledge is most important. We might study under the light of the sun, but the moon's brightness will come tonight."

Bellanore stares at me, and I just grin back.

"'Parting is such sweet sorrow,'" I say, "that I shall say goodbye but will see you again before it be morrow."

Bellanore shakes her head, a smile curling her lips. "It—"

The bell rings, and I rush to her side to accompany her to her next class.

"My cousin and her werewolf are far more like Romeo and Juliet," she protests.

"Ah, yes, but the all-seeing moon—"

"In the play, it was the all-seeing sun," she corrects.

"Yes, but we're werewolves," I growl, "and the line refers to—"

"Rosaline," she says slowly. She giggles. "And Julian did have a crush on me before he fell in love with Romelia. Oh, you are clever!"

"Why do you sound so surprised?" I grumble.

"I have to wait for your proposal, don't I?" she asks. "When?"

I kiss her forehead. "'Parting truly is sweet sorrow.'"

She groans, and I laugh.

This time, my professor gives me an excuse to head to her class, and I declare, "'Did my heart love till now? Forswear it, sight for I ne'er saw true beauty till this night.'"

"It's not night yet," Wyatt Spark calls out.

The werewolf used to bully Bellanore. He even tousled with me a few times, but we've cleared the air. We're friends now.

And he's in on this too.

"When it be night, all joy will be had," I say. "A feast, a merriment, a joy, what wonders will be in store, when all can have so very much and more."

"More time for studies to resume, perhaps?" the professor asks dryly. "If you are not careful, Mr. Spark, you might need to remain behind after classes to pay more attention to your studies."

"If I must, I must," Wyatt says, "but I would rather tomorrow and not tonight."

The professor glares at me, but it's an act, and I scurry away.

At lunchtime, I try to distract Bellanore so she does not eat much at all. At the next class, the one I have with Bellanore, I announce for all to hear, "'And yet I wish for the thing I have; my bounty is as boundless as the moon, my love as deep; the more I give to thee, the more I have, for both are infinite.'"

And in the last class of the day, I slip inside her classroom with no

excuse at all to declare Bellanore, “A light in the darkness calls to me. ‘But soft, what light through yonder windows breaks? It is the east, and Bellanore is the moon.’”

Much to my delight, Bellanore responds in kind. “‘Come, gentle night; come, loving, black-browned night; give me my Robb; and when I shall die, take him and cut him out in little stars, and he will make the face of heaven so fine that all the world will be in love with night.’”

“No, the world will be in love with you,” I whisper, and it takes everything in me not to go down on one knee right then and there.

But instead, I stick to the plan, and once the final class is finally done, I bring Bellanore to the grassy mound where all of the students have gathered together. That is when I go down on one knee, and I declare loud enough for all to hear my intent toward this sweet, lovely woman.

“‘This bud of love, by summer’s ripening breath, may prove a beauteous flower when next we meet.’”

I hold up the ring, and Bellanore simply nods, and I slip the ring onto her finger. As I stand, my lips claim hers in a sweet kiss full of promise, and when we pull away, the students all clap, the professors too, but this proposal was not a surprise for Bellanore. She knew this was coming.

But there is a surprise in store for her once the moon shines her silvery face upon this very spot.

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Chapter 4

Bellanore

After many warm wishes from just about everyone at the academy, I attempt to track down my fiancé, but there are too many smells from all of the werewolves, and I cannot locate him. Given all of the hints in his speeches earlier, I suspect that there might be more in store for me before the night is through, but for now, I head to my room.

There, I find a rose resting on a beautiful gown. It's the faintest lilac color with flowers sewn on the bodice. The skirt is so very full, a blinding white color, and there is a train behind it, white to match the skirt, but with more of the purple flowers in two lines down the train.

"Am I to put this on?" I ask the cat perched by the window.

"Yes. Hurry. You do not have much time."

I lift my eyebrows, and then Mindy strolls in as if I invited her. She helps me into the gown and does my makeup and hair, tucking more of the same purple flowers into my braids that form a grown about my head.

And that is when it hits me. I know what the surprise is.

We are to be married this night.

Tears fill my eyes.

"Don't you dare cry!" Mindy screeches. "You look perfect. You can't ruin my hard work."

I giggle. Only a single tear rolls down, and she pats it away.

"How far we've come," I murmur, referring to both myself and Robb but also myself and Mindy. She had been one of my bullies before, but that seems like a lifetime ago.

"You deserve all of the happiness and more," she says sincerely. "Now, let's go."

It's only now that I realize she's also wearing a dress, one that is a similar shade to the flowers.

"You are my maid of honor," I say slowly.

"Oh, no! I could never take that away from Ellamaria!" she cried.

Ellamaria Ember is my very best friend.

I grin and then shake my head as everything falls into place.

"She's outside, isn't she?" I ask.

Mindy bites her lower lip. "Yes? She's the maid of honor, and I'm the bridesmaid. If that's all right, I mean. Robb arranged for everything, and technically, I shouldn't have told you any of this, but how could you not realize?"

"Robb knows I would realize, and yes, I'm glad you're my bridesmaid, but…"

“But you wished it wasn’t so fast?”

“No. No buts after all.”

We giggle, and we hurry along, the cat leading the way. Sure enough, Ellamaria is outside, wearing a dress just as lovely as Mindy's. I'm not at all shocked when my friends bring me to the spot where Robb proposed. The exact spot is where he and I now stand in front of Headmaster Virgil.

“It is rare for ones as young as these to have found a love that can withstand as many tribulations as these two have,” the headmaster says. “They have already lived out their vows, yet tonight, before all those gathered, they will make new pledges to one another. Bellanore?”

I beam at Robb even as I shake my head. “Sure. Go ahead. Make me go first when I wasn’t the one prepared for this.”

Chuckles sound from the audience, but I have eyes only for my future husband.

“I vow, Robb, to always love you, to always fight for you, to always stand beside you. No matter what the sun brings, no matter what we find by the light of the moon, I will always be there for you. You are my moon, my heart, my love. I’ll never stop loving you.”

Robb’s smile is wider than I’ve ever seen it. “Bellanore, I vow to always love you, to always fight for you, to—”

“Hey!” I protest, laughing.

“You said it so perfectly,” he says with a shrug and a wink. “But know this. My love for you will never die. Not even when I expire will I cease to love you. You are my everything, Bellanore, and it means so very much to me that you will be my wife.”

There’s an unspoken question in his eyes, and I nod. His sky blue eyes brighten. He has two scars on his face, but I do not see them anymore. All I see is him.

“I am honored that you will become Bellanore Darkfury,” he whispers.

Robb leans over to kiss me, but the headmaster clears his throat.

“Not yet,” he says a bit gruffly. “Your hands.”

We transform a single finger into a claw and slice a palm. We then press those palms together, our blood mixing, and I feel a rush of love and power flood throughout every part of me.

“Let none under the moon or the sun tear this marriage apart,” Headmaster Virgil declares. “You may now kiss—”

Robb sweeps me into his arms, and his kiss makes my heart flame with all the love I have for him. This werewolf is my other half. He is the best part of me, and I hope that despite their being in Hell, that my parents can witness this, the happiest day of my life.

The happiest day of my life so far. With Robb, I hope each subsequent day is better and better, and I just know we’ll have pups, and having children with him will certainly be a blessing.

“Bellanore Darkfury,” Robb says as our guests cheer and shout congratulations. “I love you so very much.”

“I love you more,” I counter.

“No way. I love you more.”

I giggle. “I think your parents want hugs.”

“I think they can wait.”

And Robb kisses me again. By the light of the moon, we are wed, two souls becoming one. Our future is as bright as can be, and I, for once, cannot wait to see what life has in store for us upon the morrow.

~

And that concludes Bellanore and Robb’s love story! I hope you enjoyed their story as much as I loved writing it!

The Moonstone Academy trilogy is part of my A Mayhem of Magic World Story universe which starts with my Bedlam in Bethlehem series. It’s so much fun to keep expanding this world!

Next up will be a trilogy centered around HEX Unite!

Please consider leaving a review if you enjoyed Moonstone Academy trilogy! I love to read my reviews. Thank you!

Until next book,

~Nicole

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Other Books By Nicole Zoltack

Bedlam in Bethlehem series

Cops plus Supernatural Creatures

Magical Hunters Academy trilogy

A school for paranormal teens to train to fight evil creatures

Blood Haven Academy trilogy

A paranormal retelling of Romeo and Juliet

Moonstone Academy trilogy

A half-werewolf, half demon and a cursed werewolf… What can go wrong?

Magical Prison

A fairy tries to free her twin from prison and save the world

Rebel, Supernatural Bounty Hunter trilogy

A human hunts supernaturals

HEX Unite trilogy

A grim reaper, a sandman, and their friends try to save the world

A Girl and Her Hellhounds

The youngest daughter of Lucifer is going to do things her way

Magic Incarnate Series

Magic + Faith + Teens

Once Upon a Darkened Night Series

Twisted Fairy Tales - the villains are now the heroes

The Queenmaker Series

YA Female King Arthur Retelling

Heroes of Falledge trilogy

A superhero struggles to find love and save his town

Age of Dragons Series

A tale of lost magic and dragon riders

The Winged Beast Chronicles

Dragons enslave humans.

***In the Eye of the Dragon* written as N. M. Zoltack**

An epic fantasy saga

***Magical Awakening* written as Nicole Beyer**

Friends attempt to save a friend from a magical sickness

Beyond Boundaries

Can love cross class boundaries?

Standalones

Dark Hunt

Vampires vs witches vs humans

Bloodlust

Epic fantasy with forbidden love

His Soul Purpose

A vampire tries to reclaim his soul

Moonstruck

Gender-bent Cinderella set in NOLA

The Test of Time

Unpredictable time travel

Love Before Honor

Medieval knight. Regency lady. Magical Christmas.

Joy to the World

One lady. Two dukes, one an imposter

Christmas Kisses

Two gentlemen, only one Lady Anna's mother approves of

Starving for Love

The Little Mermaid with a zombie twist

Guns and Fangs

A vampire huntress turns into that which she hates

Not on Her Watch

A military romance

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About the Author

Nicole Zoltack is a USA Today bestselling author who loves to write romances. Of course. She did marry her first kiss, after all!

When she's not writing about knights, superheroes, or witches, she enjoys spending time with her loving husband, three energetic young boys, and precious little girls. She enjoys riding horses (pretending they're unicorns, of course!) and going to the PA Renaissance Faire dressed in garb. She'll also read anything she can get her hands on. Her current favorite TV shows are The Witcher and Stranger Things.

Sign up for her newsletter to learn when her next book is released as well as excerpts, cover reveals, and giveaways!

For more information
www.NicoleZoltack.com
Nicole.Zoltack@NicoleZoltack.com

OceanofPDF.com

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And finally, I want to acknowledge my readers. You are why I write. As long as you keep reading, I'll keep writing. So please keep reading, all right?

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Author's Note

Hi, readers! I absolutely hate proofreading errors. My editor, proofreaders, and I try to find them all, but sometimes, a few will slip through. If you find any, please feel free to email at Nicole.Zoltack@gmail.com or message me on FB with the errors. I'll correct the file as soon as I can get to it!

Oh, and if you'd like, feel free to tell me anything else you like—something about the stories, the characters, if there's any story you would want me to tell?

Finally, if you would like to join my beta reader team or my ARC team, be sure to mention that too!

I'm off to write the next book!

~Nicole

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